

Worship and Action Update, 8/8/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

This week marks the 58th anniversary of our nation's employment of atomic weapons. 90,000 human beings perished instantly in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and 40,000 in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. Both cities were utterly destroyed. By the end of that year another 90,000 or more had died, and tens of thousands suffered injuries and long-term harm to health.

How do we as individuals and a nation, as a society and a community of human beings, remember and learn from these events? How do perspective, bias, and interest influence memory? How can the lessons of this history be shaped by our faith and our relationship with God? And how can we apply those lessons as we strive to live in the Light?

Much ink has been dedicated to debating whether the use of atomic bombs was justified, the calculus of lives saved versus lives lost, the need for shock and awe to bring the Japanese leadership to their knees and their senses, and thereby to bring to a close the terrors of World War II. See, for example, *Hiroshima's Shadow, Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy*, edited by Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz (The Pamphleteer's Press 1998).

David Krieger, president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, recounts some of that debate in a recent article entitled "Remembering Hiroshima & Nagasaki" (August 1, 2003 www.wagingpeace.org/articles/03.08/0801krieger_hiroshima+nagasaki.htm). He addresses the need to feel justified in the use of these weapons, and how that need in turn promotes a sense of self-righteousness and a willingness to embrace nuclear weapons as an instrument of international policy:

Many myths have grown up around the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that have the effect of making the use of nuclear weapons more palatable. To restate, one such myth is that there was no choice but to use nuclear weapons on these cities. Another is that doing so saved the lives of in excess of one million US soldiers. Underlying these myths is a more general myth that US leaders can be expected to do what is right and moral. To conclude that our leaders did the wrong thing by acting immorally at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, slaughtering civilian populations, flies in the face of this widespread understanding of who we are as a people. To maintain our sense of our own decency, reflected by the actions of our leaders, may require us to bend the facts to fit our myths.

* * *

Our understanding of Hiroshima and Nagasaki helps to give rise to our general orientation toward nuclear weapons. Because of our myths about the benefits of using nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is a tendency to view nuclear weapons in a positive light. Despite the moral

issues involved in destroying civilian populations, most US citizens can justify reliance on such weapons for our "protection."

This view was echoed by the Mayor of Hiroshima, Tadatoshi Akiba, during his city's ceremonies of remembrance. He said that the United States "appears to worship nuclear weapons as God." (Reported in an article "Hiroshima Mayor Lashes Out at Bush on Atomic Bombing Anniversary" published on August 8, 2003 by Agence France Presse and reprinted in Common Dreams at www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0806-10.htm.)

A somewhat different, but equally disturbing, perspective is offered by James Carroll, a former priest and now author (including most recently **Constantine's Sword, The Church and the Jews** (Houghton Mifflin Co. 2001)) and columnist for the Boston Globe. In his recent article "America's Habit of Revenge" (August 5, 2003 www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/217/oped/America_s_habit_of_revenge+.shtml), he draws attention to the most fundamental reason the atomic bombs were used and offers a chilling lesson for today:

"Having found the bomb, we have used it." These are words spoken by President Truman in a radio address to the American people on the evening of Aug. 9, the day a second bomb fell on Nagasaki. "We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare."

President Truman, and others who justified the bomb, would rarely speak this way again - a direct articulation of revenge as a main motivation for the overwhelming destruction of the Japanese cities....

* * *

Pearl Harbor resurfaced in the American memory on Sept. 11, 2001. Again and again, the Day of Infamy was invoked as the relevant precedent - the only other time the United States had suffered such a grievous blow. And just as before, there was never any doubt that the blow would be avenged.... President Bush took America to war against Iraq to satisfy that primordial need. And it worked. The United States of America clenched its fist the day the twin towers came down. Against Iraq, the United States finally threw a punch that landed. That is all that matters.

The controversy over the Bush administration's misleading "justifications" for the war in Iraq is a reprise of the endless debate over "justifications" offered for the atomic bomb. Neither set of questions grips the American conscience.... When we want our revenge, we take it. And, even as the flimsy rationales with which we cloak it are stripped away, we fervently deny that vengeance, not justice, defines our purpose.

All these perspectives invite us to see the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as pitting forces of absolute good and total evil. In contrast to the more standard American view that ascribes heroic sanctity to our actions, these authors suggest that the American relationship with nuclear weapons is a form of idolatry. In a recent article - "On (Not) Getting Used to Hiroshima Day" (<http://www.brudershof.com.au/articles/jca/Hiroshima.htm>) - Johann Christoph Arnold, an author and spokesperson for the Bruderhof Communities, offers a more supple and faith-based understanding:

I am familiar with all the arguments defending America's use of the A-bomb.... I am also well versed in the thinking of anti-nuclear activists, many of whom see the arms race as the sole root of evil. But is the issue really so cut and dried? It is easy to demonize a leader like Emperor Hirohito, and to fight him to the bitter end in the name of freedom and truth. It is harder to face the fact that the demons unleashed by war can grip *any* heart, if given room.

World War II had its own set of villains. Today we have Saddam, Osama, and Kim Jong Il. But lest we point the finger at them - and forget that others are pointing back - let us consider something Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once observed about evil. He says that the line separating it from good does not pass "through states, classes, and political parties" but "right through every human heart." He goes on: "It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it in your own heart."

Walter Wink speaks to our condition in his book *Unmasking the Powers* (Fortress Press 1986). He recalls the words attributed to Paul in 2 Cor. 11:14 that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" and considers how to respond to invocations to battle against absolute evil (at page 33):

One moment the devil lures us to boundlessness, the next to moralistic rigidity.... [H]e follows the current of our inclinations and presses us and overthrows us on the side to which he sees we are leaning.

The difficulty then lies precisely in discerning God's will in a field where Satan appears prepared to suit up for either team. But precisely that is his service: *Satan prevents our presuming on the basis of theology, Scripture, tradition, custom, reason, science, instinct, or intuition, that we can know the will of God, apart from listening acutely for every word that proceeds from the mouth of God....*

That is why we must never attempt to straitjacket Satan in rigid doctrinal categories. Satan is not a fixed, unnuanced figure. The tendency ... to regard Satan as unambiguously evil breeds a paranoid view of reality. It justifies the demonizing of opponents. It prevents our loving our enemies.

It legitimates violence against those whom we regard as irredeemably evil.
It conceals from us our own shadow and our ambivalence toward evil.....

In a time when demonizing is rampant, how are Friends “listening acutely for every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”?

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship and Action working group