

UNDERSTANDING OF PEACE IN CHRISTIANITY- PEACE IN THE HUMAN SOUL, PEACE AMONG PEOPLE AND PEACE AMONG NATIONS

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(Abstract)

This paper tackles the issue of peace in Christianity. We discuss the conception of peace as one of the most important questions of the human individual and collective life primarily in the writings of the Old and New Testament. In these most important documents for the overall Christian teaching, specific features, special and common ideas, values and understandings of peace are highlighted. It is considered that justice is a condition for peace, and that injustice leads to conflict, which is emphasized in several places in the Old Testament. The idea and belief that the expected Messiah will restore the peace that originally ruled in heaven is presented in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, as well as in the old one, peace is considered a gift of God's love. First, the peace means peace in the soul of man, as a normal state of grace of the human soul that is free from the bondage to sin. The New Testament call to pacifism relies on the personal example of Jesus Christ and His teachings. According to the Church, the first necessary condition for the current peace is - Glory to God in the highest, which means peace loving in the name of God, not by personal or political interests and not for earthly glory.

The orthodox view in the tradition of thought that governs the ethics of war and peace are considered.

Keywords: *Peace, Old Testament, New Testament, Messiah, Jesus Christ, Christianity, belief, God*

Introduction

Peace is a universal human value but given the different ideological, philosophical or religious perspective, it is variously interpreted and perceived. There are different concepts of peace even within the same culture, not to speak about understanding the concept of peace of different peoples or distant historical epochs. That is why the phenomenon and the issues of peace must always be considered within certain social-historical context.

One might say, not to exaggerate, there is no system of ideas, beliefs, meanings and values in which, on the scale of values, peace is as high as it is in Christianity. This is not a mere repetition of nice wishes, which have always existed in human history and the history of ideas and beliefs, but it simply stems from the very essence and the whole of Christian beliefs and teachings.

We will try to reconstruct the Orthodox conception of peace by the interpretation of the Holy Scripture and characteristic parts in the works of the Fathers¹. We believe that, for a consistent and original interpretation, it is always best to start from the basis and foundation of a teaching or system of ideas and fundamental values. In addition, we will partly use the views on peace found in the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*.

Peace in the Bible

It is completely understandable and expected that in the Bible the issue of peace is discussed as one of the most basic and important issues of individual human life, social and earthly existence. The concept of peace in the Bible is much broader than its political ideas

¹ See more: J. Zizioulas of Pergamon, "Ontology and Ethics", *Sabornost*, Journal of the Diocese of Braničevo, 1-4, Požarevac 2003, 97-101

and concepts. In the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul speaks of God's peace, which is inscrutable, unknowable, beyond every mind: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4, 7). This peace means peace of man with God, peace with oneself and peace with other people, which is inseparable from one another. However, people with their efforts only are not able to create such a peace. Man is a creature of the Lord and all his fruits and creation depend on the mercy of God. Peace, of course, in all its complex dimensions and shapes in this regard is no exception.

For the Jews, peace (*shalom*) meant welfare, prosperity and safety. For the Greeks, peace (*eirene*) meant the state of order and harmony, for the Romans, peace (*pax*) meant simply the absence of war and the existence of justice in the world. Justice in the world was exclusively Roman feature and meant their understanding and interpretation of justice. For both the Greeks and Romans, peace meant the realm of abundance. Universalistic ideas to establish peace on earth by conquering the whole world and subjugating all nations to one government can be seen almost throughout the entire history, under different ideological justifications. In the Roman Empire, universal and eternal peace was planned to be achieved by conquering the whole world and establishing a rule of law. The war spread the circle (the world) in which the war rarely occurred, and if there was any, it would be subject to absolute condemnation and punishment. For the Romans, peace was the most effective instrument of their rule in the existing world. The Roman Empire was even called peace – *pax romana*. Alexander the Macedonian intended to conquer the world and keep it unique in peace based on the ancient culture. Thus, war and armed forces are considered only as a means of achieving the intended peace. Similar universalistic ideas of peace on earth still exist. Some world power centers are now using socio-historical processes of globalization to achieve their absolute domination and rough and violent imposition, based on military power, technological and economic superiority, and global peace by their standards, interests, values and desires. Today's rulers have weapons in their hands that are even more terrible to achieve such a universal peace, thus the

world peace is even more at risk and has never been more endangered. However, the world has always been rather polar or at least bipolar than unipolar, and our time apparently is not an exception.

In the Old Testament, the term *peace* is used 185 times and is seen primarily as a gift from the Lord (Yahweh): “I will give you peace in the land, and you will be able to sleep with no one to scare you”. The Old Testament rarely speaks of human means to achieve peace, but peace is understood as God’s gift. It is considered that justice is a condition for peace, and that injustice leads to conflict, which is emphasized in several places in the Old Testament: “(Those who) shed innocent blood have made them crooked paths; whoever goes therein does not know peace”; “No peace for the wicked”, “Peace will be an act of justice, righteousness will bring about tranquility and insouciance”, etc. The Old Testament conception does not exclude the possibility to achieve peace within the limits of earthly existence. The man has a role in this, which is more than the expectation, hope, pray and receiving peace as God’s gift.

Peace is not only a gift from God, but also the task of man because it is the fruit of justice: “The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever” (Isaiah 32, 17). Justice has been understood as fidelity to the Testament between God and the chosen, the Jewish people: “If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever” (Jeremiah 31, 36). If the members of the chosen people do not keep to the Testament, or do injustice, they are deprived of the fruit of justice – peace and vice versa. Thus, peace is possible as a gift of God’s justice and the fruit of man’s faith, his faithfulness to God, his righteousness. If God’s justice is gratefully responded in fidelity: “mercy and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss” (Psalm 84, 10).

The second condition for peace emphasized in the Old Testament is the belief in God, not in the power of man: “Do not rely on Assyria against Phakesias and Rezin, those that the Lord will destroy with the flame of fire. Do not rely on Babylon against Assyria. Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots. But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are

flesh and not spirit”. “If you can recover and be quiet, you will be safe, in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength”.

The biblical understanding makes difference between justice and fairness, so whatever God does is according to justice, while a man is left to act fairly. Since social life is based on fairness, the result is relative peace, order and harmony. Here, the space for human designed action and social activity remains open. According to this view, which is not absolutely deterministic, peace is not a product of natural or supernatural necessities, but is a free relationship between God and the chosen people within the Testament, in the Old Testament, or God and man in general, in the New Testament. When the Jewish people violated the Testament making sins, being unfaithful and ungrateful, they lost their peace with God and one another, and speaking in vain: “Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6, 14). The Old Testament discussed this ideal of peace, where the peace meant not merely the absence of strife, riots, war, but something more, personal and social welfare in the broadest sense.

The Old Testament presents the idea and belief that the expected Messiah will restore the peace that originally ruled in heaven: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and upon His kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”(Isaiah 9, 6-7). The Old Testament prophets called Messianic kingdom the peace empire, an empire that will bring peace throughout the world. According to the prophets in the Old Testament, the history will end with a permanent and general peace: “And the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the lynx shall lie down with the kid ... They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11, 6. 9). Then the violence and war will disappear: “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any

more (Isaiah 2, 4). Thus, the relationship between the individual and the community of God, the relation of man to his neighbor, to himself and to nature, gives birth to peace or discord.

The New Testament gives concept of peace as the welfare and safety: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14, 17). Peace is seen as a victory over the forces of darkness: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16, 20). Christians are called to humility, meekness, patience and perseverance: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4, 1-3).

We know that peace is a multifaceted concept that is very secretive and difficult to be conceived, and so we can talk about peace in man, peace of a man with another man, peace of individuals and communities for the Lord, but also the peace of the community toward another and different human community. Interestingly, as the cessation of hostilities between nations, in the New Testament, peace is mentioned only twice in the Acts of the Apostles (usually referred simply as Acts).² Peace above all, means peace with God, “By faith, we have peace with God”. According to the Christian understanding, man is not to trust in something else, something that comes from him or nature, fuller than in the Lord. Because everything else (wealth, fame, friends, allies) is impermanent and the man is always in fear and anxiety not to be betrayed. The man himself, as created, temporary, physical and mortal being is impermanent, changeable, and subject to the impulses, passions and many fall-downs, so that naturally almost all of his creations, alliances, friendships and vows are subject to that human volatility, changeability and tendency to fall and collapse. Therefore, only the man who loves and fulfills the law of God is calm

² “And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their countries was nourished by the king’s country”. (Acts 12, 20 and 24, 2); “And when he was called forth, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence” (Acts 24, 2).

and peaceful. So is in all life, social and historical situations: troubles, illnesses, wealth, poverty.

What does “God’s Peacemaker”, which the New Testament requires from the man to be, mean? This means, above all, to have peace in your soul, be at peace with God, because it is a presupposition that the gift of God may spread to other people. The Lord is the God of love and perfect, while the man is sinful and imperfect. Peace is in violation of man’s sin. To achieve something in this regard, a peacemaker should start from himself. The one who achieves peace in oneself and spreads it among the people remains in God, and is worth of the highest honor, the greatest happiness, to be called from God and recognized as the son of God: “Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God”.³ Anyone who is at peace with God can give peace. “And when you come into a house, salute it saying: peace come upon this house! And if the house be worthy, let your peace come upon it: but if it be not worthy, let your peace return to you. (Matthew 10, 12-13). Christian Peace does not mean abundance, but the joy, life, hope and strength: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”.

In the New Testament, as well as the old one, peace is considered a gift of God’s love. First, peace means the peace in the soul of man, as a normal state of grace of the human soul that is free from the bondage to sin. This peace is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15, 13; Galatians 5, 22). Normal state of the soul means the state of reconciliation with God: “God is not a God of disorder but of peace”

³ Angels and spiritual beings were in the Old Testament called Sons of God (Job 38, 7), and the people of Israel (5 Moses 32, 6), was most often the subject of God’s love and care, and it was obliged to listen to God as their Creator. In this sense, the prophet Hosea (1, 10) promises that the converted, repentant Israelites, who were not within the people of God, will be called the sons of the living God. In the New Testament, the phrase “son of God” should be understood in the religious and moral sense first. Peacemaker is like God, the God of peace (Romans 16, 20; 2 Corinthians 13, 11). Moreover, this term means and sonship of God, to whom we come through Jesus Christ. Like the Son of God brought peace to mankind (Luke 2, 14), his followers become sons of God, if they achieve that messianic peace in themselves, and spread it to other people. In particular, those who achieve peace loving their enemies act as God dealt with sinful humanity, and that is why they become their sons. As such, they will be raised to the height and state of angels (Luke 20, 36), included in the company of angels, the righteous (Hebrews 12, 22-23) and the ministers of God’s throne (Revelation 22, 3).

(1 Corinthians 14, 33). The gift of peace also depends on human effort, for the gifts of the Holy Spirit manifest only where there is the movement of the human heart coming from the opposite direction that is remorsefully facing justice of God. Only the soul that is filled with peace is possible to pour the peace outside (2 Timothy 1, 6). Therefore, peacemaking is a task for all Christians and the Church as a whole: “If possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12, 18); try to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4, 3). The New Testament call to peace relies on the personal example of Jesus Christ and His teachings.

What do the seemingly paradoxical words of Christ mean? “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be those of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. (Luke 14, 26-27). As the Old Testament suggests that the Messiah would be a prince of peace, that he would bring peace to the world, the Lord explains that his appearance does not mean that the peace came to earth, that the struggle against evil is over. With these words, Christ wants to warn of the real purpose and effect of his coming, and that is the salvation of men from sin and the introduction of the kingdom of heaven. However, many will not accept Christ and His peace.⁴ By sending the apostles to preach, the Lord told them they should bring peace to the homes and cities. According to the Christian understanding, social and family order does not have goal in itself, but in God’s kingdom (Matthew 6, 33); that is why Christ wants, brings and offers the world his peace. Peace in the human soul, peace among people and peace among different nations is, according to the Christian understanding, only a prerequisite of man’s preparation for the kingdom of heaven and eternal life.

⁴ Christ offers his peace to all men, but not all receive the divine gift. Some even oppose. Therefore, separation occurs between people, two camps are created: one for Christ, and the other against; even friends, relatives, members of one family belong to opposing camps.

Peace as precondition of salvation

According to Christian understanding, the goal of peace is not only safety (personal and collective), progress (economic and cultural), the preservation of human creation, the defense and preservation of the state. Peace has a higher purpose than that, for the fulfillment of these conditions is not a guarantee for the striving of Christians towards the final goal, but could mean more comfortable and carefree idolatry. For Christians, peace is only a prerequisite, condition, means for achieving the ultimate goal of life of individuals and nations, and that is *salvation*. The aim and purpose of peace should be for the glory of God. Christian sense of general human life on earth could be covered by this formula: “Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and good will among men”.

It is believed that the meaning of the above verse from the Gospel is so significant that it can be taken as the center, the essence of the overall Christian view of the world, and so universal that it can be applied by non-Christians – all people and nations. It explains the task of people living together on earth, which is not utopian, in the sense of earthly paradise, which is impossible as long as the world lies in evil and since the fullness of time has not occurred yet. This is not the eternal peace of the deceased, on which Leibniz read the inscription on the gate of a cemetery. It is not the peace of remote wilderness inhabited by all sorts of settlers. It is not the false peace, or truce, armistice, during which you should prepare for war. According to the Christian understanding, true peace, or the Kingdom of God, is not of this world – it is the peace of God, it is Christ’s promise of peace: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, I do not give to you as the world gives”.

According to the Church, the first necessary condition for the current peace is – Glory to God in the highest, which means peace loving in the name of God, not by personal or political interests and not for earthly glory: “Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory”. The second condition of peace is – good will among people, which means wish well to other people, or at least do not wish anyone evil. Peace of God should rule in the hearts of people. However, this

does not mean that tranquility of certain individuals is enough for peace. Peace is a social category, and therefore cannot be achieved only by the asceticism to which, for example, the eastern hesychasts tended. Holy Bishop Nikolai (Velimirovich) writes: “A testament is absolutely necessary for true peace and for lasting peace. Let current peacemakers decide exactly the goal of peace that the heavens and the earth can hear, and soon we will know how far the war is from us”.⁵

The Old and New Testament give us a valuable understanding of peace and its values, which are eternal, universal and omnipresent. It is necessary now and ever again to study and read the words of God that can be and are a signpost to individual, social groups, communities and nations of the world for action. They are also a necessary landmark, which in this troubled world would direct them toward the right and righteous goals and ultimate sense of a human life on Earth - salvation. Human, community and nation's activities as directed by the actions and words of Christ will make our world more beautiful, peaceful and dignified place for every human being created, as the Lord is above all a God of love and peace.

Conclusion

Peace is a universal human value but there are different concepts of peace even within the same culture. This creates many problems and dilemmas in discovering the secret of peace and therefore the phenomenon of peace must be considered within a specific socio-historical context. Christianity and other monotheistic religions significantly address the issues of peace. However, one might say, not to exaggerate, there is no system of ideas, beliefs, meanings and values in which, on the scale of values, peace is as high as it is in Christianity.

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⁵ Bishop Nikolai, *War and the Bible*, Svetosavska Literary Association, Belgrade, 1993, 169

to one government can be seen almost throughout the entire history, under different ideological justifications. Similar universalistic ideas of peace on earth still exist.

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