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Peace: The Moral Issue of the Day

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PEACE -- THE MORAL ISSUE OF THE DAY.

(On February 23, 1991, the University Christian Movement of New England held a conference in Cambridge, MA, on "Spirituality and Activism." What follows is a talk given at this conference by Boone Schirmer of the Friends of the Filipino People.)

The title the UCM chose for this session has brought me a little kidding from family and friends. Yesterday my daughter-in-law called to ask if I was shining up my halo and smoothing out my wing feathers in preparation for the talk. And earlier yet a good friend of mine who had seen a poster advertising the meeting called to say, "Hey, Boone, since when did you become an expert on spirituality?"

The truth is I am no such expert. I will approach the question of spirituality in a very personal way, without any pretensions to authority. You will see that my ideas on this subject are highly colored by my work as a historian.

When I think of spirituality, I think of a person with high ideals, of a person with very decided moral values, a man or woman whose mental vision of a better world is often at variance with the injustices and oppressions of the world as it is.

My feeling for spirituality is well expressed in a poem written by James Russell Lowell, the outstanding Cambridge abolitionist. I will read you two verses of this poem (which you may know as a hymn). But before I do I must tell you that I first heard this poem recited by a secretary of the New England University Christian Movement named Jeffrey Campbell. He was a black man who had this job in the 1930s, and he and I often cooperated in the peace movement of that day. Jeff was very fond of this poem and liked to recite it at meetings of our anti-war movement.

The poem reads:

"Once to every heart and nation  
Comes the moment to decide  
In the strife of truth with falsehood  
For the good or evil side  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah  
Offering each the bloom or blight  
And the choice goes by forever  
Twixt the darkness and that light.

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PEACE, 2.

"In the light of burning martyrs  
Jesus' bleeding feet we track  
Coiling up new Calvaries ever  
With the cross that turns not back;  
New occasions teach new duties,  
Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still and onward,  
Who would keep abreast of truth."

Now let me give you an example from real life of a person I believe to be endowed with spiritual qualities -- she is Rosa Parks, the black cleaning woman who changed her seat on an Alabama bus, defying the powers-that-be and putting herself at risk, to help rid this country of discrimination against people of color.

I believe there are several important things to be learned from the example of Rosa Parks.

First of all -- that spirituality is not an attribute that is confined to the elite, or to the highly educated members of society. It is to be found in all social classes, and perhaps even especially to be found among the lowly and oppressed who suffer most from the negative features of current social reality. In this regard we must pay tribute to the tremendous contribution of the black people of the United States to our country's spiritual heritage, as exemplified by Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, W. E. B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Crispus Attucks, and many others. It is important for us to call off these names today, for February, as we all know, is Negro History Month.

The second thing we may learn from Rosa Parks, in my opinion, is that spirituality gathers strength and richness when it is put into practice in daily life. That is to say, when it is connected with activism! Now activism, as I see it, covers a wide range of practice, all of it important. It is the habit of talking to family and friends about strongly held beliefs. It is bringing your opinions to the attention of the government at all levels, city, state, and national, speaking truth to power as the Quakers say. It is the business of attending meetings and marches, of organizing, on behalf of your beliefs, of committing civil disobedience to further the cause as did Rosa Parks. Activism must even include the extreme of martyrdom. I

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PEACE, 3.

think now of a young man named Gregory Levey who immolated himself on  
Amherst common in the cause of peace.

To my mind, spirituality, the moral life, are enriched and made manifest  
and socially powerful in practice. They are enriched because to put into  
practice one's beliefs is to achieve a very high form of personal integrity:  
you do as you believe, and you believe as you do.

In fact spirituality and activism, in my view, are necessary and  
complementary to each other. Moral values are needed to give direction and  
meaning to practice, and practice is needed to give moral values an objective  
reality and strength.

"New occasions teach new duties,  
Time makes ancient good uncouth."

As the poem by James Russell Lowell suggests, the world has seen a  
succession of great moral struggles in which activists imbued with compelling  
ideals have striven to bring these ideals to life. Let us run over some of  
these struggles as we have seen them in the history of our own New England  
region, and in all of which our region has played an outstanding part.

In the 17th century there was the struggle for religious freedom.  
Dissenters from the Church of England uprooted themselves and came to our  
shores as Pilgrims and Puritans, to practice the religion they believed in  
without let or hindrance. It is probably this early inheritance that  
brought into being what many regard as a real regional psychological trait,  
the so-called New England conscience.

In the 18th century there was the struggle for our freedom as a nation  
from the imperial and colonial rule of the British monarchy, to seek the  
larger freedom as a people that was proclaimed in the Declaration of  
Independence.

In the 19th century the struggle for the abolition of slavery predominated.  
In this effort the poet James Russell Lowell distinguished himself, and out  
of his experience in the struggle came the poem that I have quoted.

We can see over the centuries a continuous struggle to enlarge the area  
of human freedom reflected in the history of our New England region. Certain

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PEACE, 4.

things must be said about this ongoing struggle:

1.) Spirituality in the sense in which I use it is often related to social and political dissent and carries with it certain risks. To seek a new and better world means to be critical of the status quo and the existing order; it means oftentimes to challenge those who hold the levers of power.

The struggle for national independence implied a critique of British colonial rule; to abolish slavery meant to dissent radically from the dominant institution of the slave-owners.

2.) There is another feature to be noted. Those who participate in the struggle for a better social and political order would do well to avoid moral purism. For in the struggle for progressive social change ideal motivation often exists side by side with material motivation, and the two sides complement and re-inforce each other.

In the revolution of '76 the New England merchant class gave support to the ideal of national freedom because they thereby gained the freedom to buy and sell without the restrictions imposed by British colonial rule. The abolitionist struggle gained support from Northern capitalists who wanted the West opened up to wage-labor rather than slave labor.

3.) Finally, history teaches us that those who take part in the struggle for a better world had best avoid the arrogance of self-righteousness. In our own time such arrogance has often been stimulated by false expectations and utopian illusions held by such reformers about the process of social change in which they were engaged. In reality, however, victory or success in the struggle for greater freedom often leads to new problems or incomplete solutions of the old.

The success of the Pilgrims and Puritans in New England meant oppression and subjugation for the Native Americans, and while desiring religious freedom for themselves the Pilgrims and Puritans denied it to others.

While winning national freedom from British rule, the new republic of the United States allowed the institution of slavery to develop within its

PEACE, 5.

polity and thereby brought oppression and the deprivation of all human rights to generations of blacks in the United States. Nor did the early republic allow the vote to women.

Then came the victory over slavery. In this the blacks were liberated from outright slavery, but were soon put in a position of subordination as second class citizens, a condition still to be fully overcome.

And out of the Civil War victory came a burst of U. S. industrial and financial growth and expansion that resulted in the modern USA we know today, the social keynote of which is the domination of the country by the great industrial and financial corporations. And this modern corporate United States has carried with it like a curse or plague a history of foreign wars of intervention that today has reached a culmination in the Mideast.

This is not to say that U. S. society was not cursed by wars to suppress the Native American population; these lasted for three centuries, from 1600 to 1900.

I am talking about the wars of foreign intervention that took place alongside the suppression of the Native Americans and became a constant feature after the final defeat of the Native Americans around the end of the 19th century.

It is to this onerous feature of modern U. S. life that I wish to devote the rest of my talk. For it is my belief that just as the abolition of slavery was the central moral issue of the 19th century in U. S. life, so in the 20th century the struggle against war has become the over-arching moral issue before the nation.

The U. S. wars of foreign intervention associated with the modern corporate United States began with Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars.

Of course there were U. S. wars of foreign intervention before this.

PEACE, 6.

We can all call to mind the U. S. aggression against Mexico in the Mexican-American War of 1848. Many in New England and elsewhere opposed this war on high moral grounds as an unjust war to further the interests of the Southern slave-owners and grab new territory for them from Mexico. You may remember that young Abraham Lincoln opposed this war and lost his seat in Congress for his pains. Closer to home there was the case of Henry David Thoreau who refused to pay his taxes in protest against the war and was clapped in jail as a result. You may know the story that his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him in jail and said, "Why, Henry, what are you doing in jail?" Whereupon Henry replied, "Waldo, what are you doing out of jail?"

But it was the war with Spain and the war to conquer the Philippines that were the first of those U. S. wars of foreign intervention that have been the unfortunate trade mark of the modern corporate United States.

The victory of the Union in the Civil War led to a great expansion of industrial production in the United States. To find new markets abroad for the products of this expanding industry, the U. S. government went to war first with Spain and then with an armed nationalist movement in the Philippines. The U. S. government wished to secure Spain's colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines as markets for U. S. manufactured goods and as outposts for the U. S. military to back up the drive for foreign trade.

At this time something happened that is perhaps not as well known as it might be. In response to the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars a massive anti-war movement developed in the United States led by a Boston organization that called itself the Anti-Imperialist League.

The opponents of these wars called themselves anti-imperialists because they believed the U. S. was embarking on a policy of foreign empire or imperialism. This, they declared, was the denial of the best democratic traditions of the country that were embodied in the revolution against British imperial rule. They declared commercialism was over-riding the best ideals of the Republic.

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PEACE, 7.

Most of the leading Boston anti-imperialists had been ardent abolitionists and, in addition, they opposed the colonization of the Filipinos as a colored people. They said they had not fought against black slavery at home merely to see it imposed upon a colored people abroad.

They denounced the wars with Spain and the Philippines as unjust and immoral wars.

One of these anti-imperialists was a Harvard professor of Fine Arts, Charles Eliot Norton. Early in the war with Spain, in a speech given at a Congregational Church on Prospect Street in Cambridge in June 1898, he called for an end to the fighting. President William McKinley, as many were aware, had declared war on Spain and turned to killing just as that nation appeared ready to negotiate and accede to U. S. demands. In his speech Norton said, "... if a war be undertaken for the most righteous end before the resources of peace have been tried and proved vain to secure it, that war has no defense; it is a national crime." Therefore Norton cried out, "Stop! A declaration of war does not change the moral law. 'The Ten Commandments will not budge' at a joint resolve of Congress."

While Norton received the support of fellow abolitionists for this stand, excited jingoes sent him death threats through the mail.

The anti-imperialists were unable to stop the war with Spain or the war with the Philippine nationalists. As a result of war in the Philippines 600,000 Filipinos died, in the estimate of one U. S. general who was there at the time. The Philippines was turned into a colony of the United States and secured as a market for U. S. goods and investments, as a source of raw materials and cheap labor, and as a military outpost.

The Boston anti-imperialists won the support of millions of U. S. voters. As a result of their work the treaty to annex the Philippines passed the Senate by only one vote, and in the presidential elections of 1900 the Democratic candidate W. J. Bryan declared opposition to imperialism and the colonization of the Philippines to be the main issues of his campaign.

Many outstanding U. S. citizens gave support to the anti-war struggle

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PEACE, 8.

of the day, including Mark Twain, Jane Addams, W. E. B. DuBois, Samuel Gompers, Andrew Carnegie, ex-President Grover Cleveland, William James, and others.

Perhaps the most significant result of the anti-imperialist movement lay in the fact that after the conquest and colonization of the Philippines the U. S. government turned away from a policy of outright colonial domination of the Third World. The colonization of the Philippines had been accomplished only after a sharp and bitter war with the Philippine nationalists, and it had aroused a wave of anti-imperialist sentiment at home -- all of which had been politically bothersome and costly to the ruling Republicans.

From this time on, when the governing elite of the U. S. engaged in empire-building, they did so by what may be called informal empire. Allowing Third World countries to have formal independence, they sought to secure control by indirect means, often subordinating the wealthy governing elite of the country concerned by means of financial and military assistance. This is the policy operative today in U. S. relations with Third World countries whose raw materials, markets and investment opportunities are important to U. S. corporations, and this policy is known as neo-colonialism.

The Boston-led anti-imperialist movement, the original U. S. anti-war movement of modern times, was very rich in thought. I wish to single out three of their seminal insights.

- 1.) They identified the U. S. imperial and war-making tendency with the undue influence exercised by U. S. industrial and financial corporations over the policy of the U. S. government. In our own day General Eisenhower has echoed and refined this theme with his warning about the excessive power enjoyed in our society by the military-industrial complex.
  - 2.) They warned that if the U. S. were to embark on a policy of imperial intervention this would lead to endless foreign complications that would only divert the attention and resources of the nation away from the solution of pressing domestic problems. Present-day conditions bear this out.
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PEACE, 9.

3.) Finally it was these abolitionists turned anti-war advocates that first made the prediction that, just as the struggle against slavery had been the predominant moral issue of the 19th century for the United States, the struggle against war would be the supreme moral issue of the 20th.

In my lifetime the United States government has engaged in five wars of foreign intervention, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the present Gulf War. (This list does not include the many U. S. military incursions into Caribbean and Central American countries that have occurred in this century in pursuit of policy favorable to the U. S. corporate elite.)

All of these wars, save perhaps World War II, have had to do pre-eminently with the efforts of the advanced industrial nations to dominate the affairs of under-developed Third World nations, repeating the pattern set forth by the U. S. wars with Spain and the Philippines at the turn of the century.

World War I, in which the U. S. government participated, was fought essentially to determine which great power, England or Germany, would be dominant over the colonial or Third World nations of the globe.

In World War II the question of dominance in the Third World was present (even though the formal bonds of colonialism were mostly liquidated after the war). But in the war itself this issue was largely over-shadowed by the aggressive threat of Nazi Germany to the independent existence of a number of advanced industrial nations, France, England, the Soviet Union, even the United States itself.

The Korean and Vietnam wars were fought to establish U. S. predominance in those two Third World countries, although this issue was beclouded by the expansionist policy of the Soviet Union in Central Europe and the existence of powerful communist-led nationalist movements in both Korea and Vietnam.

Now the expansionist foreign policy of the Soviet Union has collapsed in Central Europe (and Afghanistan), and the Gulf War has occurred.

It is not only the alarming frequency of these wars that brings forward their suppression as the great moral issue of the time for the people of the

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PEACE, 10.

United States. Modern technology has perfected weapons of mass destruction of genocidal capability, threatening the very existence of the human race, -- first and foremost the nuclear weapon. (Of which, by the way, the U. S. and allies have in the number of 1,000 tactical bombs in the Mideast today. Moreover Defense Secretary Cheney has refused to rule out their use should Hussein turn to his store of chemical weapons.)

It is my belief that the present Gulf War indicates the principal foreign policy objective of the U. S. government in the post-Gold War era is to maintain U. S. global military supremacy, in order to insure U. S. predominance in the Third World. In the case of the Mideast this is clearly to secure control over a vital raw material, the oil resources of the region.

How else to explain President Bush's precipitate action in sending over a hundred thousand troops to the Gulf early in August on his own initiative? How to explain his sudden shift from defensive to offensive posture in the Mideast, again without consulting Congress or the people. How to explain what ex-President Carter called his failure to negotiate with Saddam Hussein in good faith (sending Baker instead with an ultimatum), or his hasty abandonment of economic sanctions in order to rush into the air war? Why did the public press call a negotiated withdrawal from Kuwait the Bush Administration's "nightmare scenario"? Was it because the Bush Administration had made clear its reluctance to abandon a devastating ground war? After Hussein had agreed to the main demand for withdrawal from Kuwait, why did President Bush present the Iraqi leader with another ultimatum, requiring almost immediate acceptance, at the very moment that President Gorbachev was engaged in negotiations with Baghdad that, given time, offered hope of securing even further concessions from Hussein, narrowing down the secondary issues that remained outstanding? Why, in short, did President Bush from the very beginning keep pressing for an all-out war with Iraq till he finally got it?

Granted that Saddam Hussein is a brutal tyrant and dictator and that his occupation of Kuwait was an act of criminal aggression. It is difficult to

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PEACE, 11.

believe, however, that the Bush Administration is so desperately concerned about the rights of a small nation like Kuwait.

Something about this does not ring true when we remember that the military man, General Norman Schwarzkopf, in charge of U. S. troops in the field in the Mideast, was also the military man in charge of the U. S. invasion of Grenada, and that General Colin Powell, who as chief of staff is in charge of the operation over-all, was the military man in charge of the U. S. invasion of Panama.

There are other peoples in the Mideast whose land has been subject to brutal military occupation by a foreign power, an occupation condemned again and again by the United Nations. One thinks in this case of the Palestinian people and Israel's unlawful occupation of the West Bank. Yet Washington has been noticeably complacent about this, even supplying the occupying power with millions of dollars in military aid at U. S. taxpayers' expense.

Nor does the fact that Saddam Hussein is a vicious dictator seem to offer an adequate explanation. For years previous to this Washington has built up Hussein despite his brutality, and President Bush now cooperates most happily with a similarly reprehensible Mideast ruler, Assad of Syria.

Why, then, did Hussein's occupation of Kuwait stimulate the U. S. government to such a drive towards war?

Answers to this problem may be found in press accounts that appeared early in August before the war broke out and when the atmosphere of public discussion was considerably freer.

I turn, first of all, to Thomas L. Friedman, the New York Times Mideast expert, who wrote in that paper on August 2, 1990: "Laid bare, American policy in the gulf comes down to this: troops have been sent to retain control of oil in the hands of a pro-American Saudi Arabia, so prices will remain low."

But that seems to be only part of the story. To fill it out consider what Andrew Rosenthal wrote about General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the New York Times of August 9, 1990. The writer first quotes Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona, to the effect that,

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PEACE, 12.

"Colin Powell is the first chairman since the end of the Vietnam War that doesn't constantly warn us about body bags." Then Rosenthal writes:

General Powell was not entirely certain last week that Iraq was going to invade Saudi Arabia, Administration officials said, but argued that the United States had to send a clear warning to Saddam Hussein in any case. And in a broader sense, it needed to demonstrate that it is still a super-power.... From the start, Powell... told the President that there should be a military operation, if for nothing else, then to show the flag.

Powell himself explained the policy in this way: "I certainly agree that we should not be going around saying we are the world's policeman. But guess who gets called when suddenly someone needs a cop?"

An article in the New York Times of August 9, 1990, explains how all this was brought about:

Mr. Bush had to muster all of his finesse on the telephone to persuade the skittish Arab leaders that they would need -- and should accept -- American help.

Despite dozens of telephone calls by Mr. Bush, including personal appeals to King Fahd, it took two more days for the Arabs to accept the idea that they could not work out the crisis among themselves.

In other words President Bush had to press hard to persuade the rulers of Saudi Arabia of the danger they faced from Iraq, a danger of which the President's chief military adviser "was not entirely certain."

That is the way the cop was called.

This, then, is what I believe to be the purpose of the Bush Administration in the Gulf War: to make clear to all that in the post-Cold War era it is the United States that is to be the world's policeman, however self-appointed. This is the meaning of President Bush's New World Order.

Besides indicating the objective of the Bush Administration's military operations in the Gulf, the Powell interview suggests that, while Bush is indeed the champion of the imperial presidency, he is surrounded in this capacity at the highest level by a clique of right-wing hawks, including Powell, Scowcroft, Cheney, Sununu, and Dan Quayle.

Bush's reluctance to abandon a war to the finish with Iraq may be seen

PEACE, 13.

as determination not to give up the prospect of a smashing military victory in the Mideast, for this above all would establish Washington as the supreme boss in that region, not to be challenged in its military might, and would also serve as a warning to potential disturbers of the status quo elsewhere in the Third World. In this calculation the possible loss of U. S. and Iraqi lives could be considered as "collateral damage" incidental to the achievement of the main goal.

In conclusion it would probably be of interest to members of the University Christian Movement to consider what outstanding religious leaders have to say about the Gulf War today. Meeting in Canberra, Australia, is the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches. This body, acting in session, asked world leaders and the United Nations to end the fighting, saying, "It is never too late to seek peace and a comprehensive settlement."

Their position is a new and powerful factor making for peace, and it contrasts with the position of the World Council Churches in 1950 when it endorsed the U. S. - U. N. war in Korea. (Other new factors making for peace are the rapid development of an anti-war movement in the U. S., in contrast to its late appearance in the Vietnam War, the growth of powerful anti-war movements in Germany and Japan, and, of course, the peace initiatives of President Gorbachev.)

Perhaps President Bush's Episcopal Bishop Brown should have the last word. He told delegates to the World Council of Churches meeting, "A great shadow has fallen over what appeared to be a bright new landscape. The new world order looks suspiciously like the old, with bombs and bullets doing all the talking."