

A Theopoetics of Seeking Cultures of Peace

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ABSTRACT

This article asks what theopoetics might contemporarily contribute to seeking cultures of just peace in the public square. It uses Maurice Merleau Ponty's comment, "the tongue is both an organ of language and taste," as a sexy, fleshly, incarnational reminder of the corporeal nature of language, which calls us to ask both aesthetic and ethical questions about our poetics. If we imagine theology or theopoetics without a human body, then we can become cruel and violent, allowing exploitation and war. Drawing on ten years of service with the international, ecumenical peace-building work of the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence Program, the vision of peace presented here draws on narrative examples from case studies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. It explores theopoetics within, yet also beyond, the disciplinary discourses of conflict transformation, peace studies, and political diplomacy.

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Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

– Percy Bysshe Shelley

With the emergence of theopoetics as a new genre of theological reflection and composition in the 1970's there was much emphasis on aesthetic self-creation, some would argue, at the expense of adequate ethical attention to social solidarity and public justice. Now, in the 21st century, what might theopoetics contribute to seeking cultures of just peace in the public square? The great phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty insisted, "The tongue is both an organ of language and taste." This sexy, fleshly, incarnational reminder of the corporeal nature of language calls us to ask both aesthetic and ethical questions about our poetics, for if we imagine theology or morality without or beyond a human body, then we can become cruel and violent, allowing exploitation and war.

For the past dozen years I have carried my theopoetics into the international, ecumenical peace-building work of the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence Program. In this vision of seeking cultures of peace, I have experimented with poetics and praxis, talk and taste, aesthetics and ethics. This presentation or paper will offer a reflection on poetics and social change and conclude with narrative examples from my personal case studies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas on how a theopoetics, within yet beyond the disciplinary discourses of conflict transformation, peace studies and political diplomacy, contributed to seeking and building cultures of peace.

In my essay, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics,"¹ I explore the emergence and reemergence of theopoetics as a genre of theological writing within the context of the aesthetics and erotics of self-

1 Holland, "Theology Is," 317-31.

creation. During editorial and peer review, Editor Bill Birmingham was resistant to publishing my piece unless I folded in additional writing on a theopoetics of the ethical. "That would be another essay," I insisted. Co-editor Joe Cunneen supported my authorial intention and the journal ran my essay without the addition of an explicit apologetic for the category of the ethical.

What was somewhat ironic about Editor Birmingham's sharp criticism of my essay is that so much of my professional work and writing was given to an ethics of peacemaking within the context of the Historic Peace Churches, the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Although some readers of my *CrossCurrents* piece might have sensed a division of the ethic and aesthetic, duty and desire, politics and poetics, I was really seeking a theopoetic therapy for what is too often the moral peacemaker's unbearable heaviness of being. I suppose I was really suggesting that, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Percy Shelley wrote a passionate defense of poetry in which he declared, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Shelley's friend and literary conversation partner Thomas Love Peacock wrote an essay entitled, "The Four Ages of Poetry." He argued that in the contemporary, industrialized age the role of the poet had appropriately and more effectively been taken on by philosophers and statesmen. Further, Peacock, offering cutting criticisms of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, but excluding his friend Shelley, charged, "A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days of the past."

Peacock's negative declaration led Shelley to respond, "Your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage . . . I had the greatest possible desire to break a lance with you...in honor of my mistress Urania." To honor Urania, his Muse of poetry, he wrote *A Defense of Poetry* in 1921

but it was only published posthumously in 1840 by his spouse and editor Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly.²

Drawing from his earlier unpublished essay, “A Philosophic View of Reform,” Shelly contends in *Defense* that poets are creative philosophers and imaginative thinkers who contribute profoundly to ethical, civic and political life. Shelley embraced progressive politics, including a commitment to nonviolent social change, which he viewed as inseparable from his poetics. He believed the work of poets, writers and artists would stimulate social reforms that would serve the common good.

I first discovered Shelly’s *Defense* quite accidentally while in Winnipeg giving a peace lecture. While looking at rare and collectable books at a local bookseller’s shop, I purchased *Knocking on Dylan’s Door* by the authors of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. A chapter in the book by Michael McClure titled “Bob Dylan: The Poet’s Poet,” links Dylan’s poetic process with the aesthetic philosophy of Shelley.³ Since this discovery of *Defense of Poetry*, I have read writers as diverse as philosopher Richard Rorty and poet Adrienne Rich affirm and celebrate the insights of Shelley’s piece for both self-creation and social solidarity.

Much could be written about Shelley’s aesthetic or poetic insights on the categories of mind, knowledge, reason and imagination. However, I want to focus on his poetics of the imagination as an important pathway to seeking cultures of peace. Consider this passage from the *Defense*.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination; and poetry is connate with the origin off man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move by their motion to ever-

2 Shelly, *A Defense of Poetry*.

3 McClure, online.

changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not only melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them....

Shelley compares the mind to an Aeolian harp or lyre. This wind harp enjoyed renewed popularity during the Romantic era and both Shelley and Coleridge included it in their poems and philosophical speculations. In Shelley's poetics of the mind there are two faculties at work: reason, conscious thought or understanding and the imagination.

Even as the wind blows over the strings of the harp creating a melody, so a series of external and internal impressions move over the human mind and create a melody of thought. However, there is another faculty within the human person, which unlike merely responding to wind on the harp, can poetically adjust the sounds and motions of thought beyond melody to compose a harmony. This important mental faculty is the imagination, which for Shelley is linked with poetry more than with rational analysis.

Philosopher Richard Rorty commented on the importance of Shelley's understanding of the imagination in the last essay he wrote before pancreatic cancer stole his life. Rorty, the towering American philosopher, published this very personal essay not in a philosophy guild journal but in *Poetry* magazine. Rorty writes that "reason can only follow paths which the imagination has first broken open. No words, no reasoning. No imagination, no new words. No such words, no moral or intellectual progress."⁴

Indeed, this generative understanding of the imagination helped contribute to an important paradigm shift from Just War to Just Peace during the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV). I was on the drafting committee which produced two documents for the consummation and celebration

4 Rorty, "The Fire of Life," 129.

of the end of DOV in Kingston, Jamaica in May of 2011. These writings, *An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* and *The Just Peace Companion*,⁵ capture a growing international, ecumenical consensus that “just war has become obsolete.” The new path to both human flourishing and security is now believed to be found in the way of just peace. I have called this rather astonishing shift a movement “From a Military Metaphysics to a Poetics of Peace.”

It was the brilliant sociologist C. Wright Mills who first argued that the imaginary of our modern period is captured by a “military metaphysics.”⁶ According to Mills, this is a military definition of ultimate reality. When considering how to guarantee, secure and protect our life, liberty and happiness, even those who profess a belief in peace, look to the old master narratives and inherited vocabularies of military might and defense in their comprehensive philosophical and political accounts of how to insure and protect the good life in a violent world.

However, within the context many grassroots international meetings, consultations and conferences during the WCC-DOV program, participants told stories of war and peace, narratives of both violent encounters and peaceful conflict transformations. As war weary delegates spoke out of the deep phenomenological slices of their lives, it became clear that the old military metaphysics was being deconstructed not by doctrine, dogma or political ideology but by an emerging, story-shaped, poetics of peace. In fact, we organizers of these international gatherings discouraged any systematic theologizing or political campaigning and explicitly invited participants to speak in an existential narrative voice. It was from this new poetics, these new words, these fresh confessional imaginaries that new paths for reasoning together about the resolution or transformation of conflict were broken open.

5 World Council of Churches Publications, 2011,

6 Mills, *The Power Elite*. 225-41.

Following the tone and texture of Shelley's *Defense of Poetry*, I will organize my remaining thoughts on a theopoetics of seeking cultures of peace around the themes of a poetics of love, a poetics of pleasure, a poetics of people and place, and finally, a poetics of social transformation.

A POETICS OF LOVE

Consistent with the Gospel witness Shelley claims that "the great secret of morals is love." Moving beyond what is explicitly stated in the Gospels he insists "the great instrument of moral good is the imagination." Linking love, morality and virtue with the human capacity to imagine, he writes, "To be greatly good, [one] must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own." He further suggests that poetry enlarges the moral imagination and produces a state of mind and emotion which is at war with base, unloving desires.

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in his public ethics makes an analogous point about our literate and literary affections. He suggests that attending to the stories of others, even through the reading of novels and poetry, expands our capacity to imagine other lives and different ways of living and thus produces more cosmopolitan affections.⁷

In our cosmopolitan consultations we invited participants into a poetics of comparative narratology. Some came out of rather recent experiences or memories of violence in Rwanda, Columbia and Indonesia. Others from South Africa, the Dominican and Japan were well into productive peace-building work. We invited all to speak thoughtfully from their contexts, confusions as well as places of clarity. In this process there were occasions to imagine oneself as another, thus expanding one's imagination, and therefore

7 Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.

making one's heart, mind and body politic more spacious and in moments of grace, more loving.

To love the neighbor demands that we seek to love even the questions our neighbors are asking. I experienced some of the most difficult yet satisfying conversations and consultations between Christians and Muslims in the cities of Kano and Kaduna in Northern Nigeria. For well over a decade these locations have experienced crises, riots or bloody clashes between Christians and Muslims in which churches and mosques have been burned, homes have been looted and people have been killed. "What does justice look like in the aftermath of these crises?" was a pressing question.

The invitation to a just peace in these contexts invites new vocabulary lessons and demands poetic innovation. What is peace? What is justice? Is justice retributive and punitive or can it be restorative? Can it restore not merely for the sake of the abstract principle of forgiveness but for the pragmatic social reality of the greater common good between neighbors who must share public space? In this context, with the possibilities of restorative justice, of restoring broken relationships, of loving one's neighbor as one's self in view, some words from the comparative story-telling, dialogues and debates became flesh.

Reflecting Gandhi's call to "be the peace or change you wish to see in the world," rather than remain stuck in endless prosaic speculations about the limits or largeness of justice, some Christians chose to help with the rebuilding of a destroyed mosque and some Muslims likewise helped repair a burned out church. These innovative constructive acts embodied a gritty and graced poetics of love more profound than any systematic theological or political treatise might prescribe in moral or juridical propositions.

A POETICS OF PLEASURE

Percy Shelley was aware that critics beyond Mr. Peacock questioned the utility of poetry, beauty and pleasure to improve society. To them, reason and intelligent statecraft were more useful. However, Shelley argued for the “utility” of poetry’s pleasure and beauty in offering a useable and practical wisdom “which is mingled with its delight.”

Because the Creator God of Genesis is a potter and poet more than a moralist or lawgiver, our consultations and conferences always included liturgy, poetry, music, visual art, stories, meditation and a variety of programmed and un-programmed expressions of worship. This was not a flat religious ritual to call in the God of the Gaps to fill hard silences with sounds. It was instead following our spiritual sense that aesthetics precedes ethics because the grand story of creation precedes the theo-logical story of church, synagogue, mosque, temple or pagoda.

Because we were composing together an ecumenical peace theology, we were following the direction of theopoet Amos Wilder, “Before the message, the vision; before the sermon, the hymn; before the prose, the poem. The discursive categories of theology as well as the traditional images of sermon and prayer require a theopoetic.”⁸ We became convinced that the poetic language, the rule of metaphor and liturgical consummation of theology created hospitable linguistic space to imagine and name what previously seemed unnamable or locked into the old cultural-linguistic games of redemptive violence.

Because Genesis is not the beginning of religion and morality but the beginning of desire, we took many occasions to remind ourselves that we were indeed “seeking cultures of peace” rather than doctrines of peace. We were in quest of embodied, incarnational, satisfying modes of being in the world. We remembered that this shalom was therefore not a mere ethics but

8 Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 3.

also an *eros* toward God, world, self and other, mingling moral responsibility with relational delight. After all, the Psalmist offered lovely metaphors of an erotics and aesthetics of just peace: “Truth and mercy have embraced, justice and peace have kissed.”⁹

A POETICS OF PEOPLE AND PLACE

Like all great Romantic poets, Percy Shelley privileged an engagement with people and places in this sensuous living world over abstract moral or academic principles. Abstract ethical, political or theological principles can in fact shield our gaze from the face of the other and thus from the formation of a more affectionate, innovative, imaginative ethical response.

When the WCC was formed in Amsterdam in 1948, after much debate, delegates were able to affirm, “War is contrary to the will of God.” However, the question of whether violence can be a path to justice remained a source of continued discussion and disagreement in Amsterdam and in the following decades. Some with more pacifistic tendencies said no. Others theologizing from the just war tradition said yes.

Delegates at the Amsterdam Assembly urged theologians and religious leaders around the world to continue to engage the spiritual and social implications of the question, “Can violence really lead to justice?” Over the years many in the international circles of the WCC came to doubt the possibilities of antique or contemporary just war theories to produce a lasting peace with justice. After all, virtually all modern wars, from ethnic or nationalistic expressions, to small border disputes, to grand imperialistic ventures, have claimed that the conflict was indeed a just war.

However, some with Liberation Theology sympathies have continued to suggest that liberation or emancipation violence to free the poor, oppressed

9 Psalm 85.

and disenfranchised from unjust structures might be the best example of violence providing a pathway to an eventual just peace.

We members of the drafting committee which composed the WCC Just Peace documents struggled deeply with this important question. Our work and writing carried us from Bogota to Beirut as we entered into consultations with colleagues and church leaders around the world. It was the poetics of people and place in Bogota, Columbia that helped us encounter this question with the faces of others in front of us in powerful ways. We heard testimonies from many about the violent conflicts between FARK, the revolutionaries, and the government's military and paramilitary forces.

I preached two services in a large church where many of the members were living as poor refugees in their own county. They had been displaced from their small family farms by the fierce battles between FARK and the military and truly considered themselves oppressed victims of both state and liberation expressions of "just violence." These citizens were from Catholic, Pentecostal and Presbyterian backgrounds now attending a large, hospitable, urban Mennonite Church, longing for a life of just peace.

Our most moving experience in Columbia was perhaps at a Children's Hospitality House sponsored by the Presbyterian Church. This center offered food, lodging and counseling support for children waiting to be fitted for artificial limbs in the hospitals and clinics of Bogota. They were victims of land mine violence in the endless "just war" between FARK (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Columbia*) and the government military forces. As we talked and laughed and played with little girls missing hands and little boys without feet the lingering question came into more urgent existential and incarnational focus, "Is violence the way to justice?" Most of us could quietly sigh, "Hell no, hell no!"

A POETICS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Bob Dylan, who during the civil rights and antiwar movements spent most of his time with his art rather than with more explicit activism, declared, “I don’t care who writes the laws as long as I can write the songs.”¹⁰ Like Shelley, Dylan recognized that poets are the unrecognized legislators of the world. Percy Shelley, as we have seen, never lived to see his political writings published, yet he believed in the importance of inscribing what I have called his poetics of love, pleasure, people and places into the rule of law and political policy to insure justice. Percy recognized that beauty, pleasure, love and affection inspire and delight the political imagination but that even if we cannot love our neighbor, we nevertheless owe our neighbor the justice which can be prescribed and protected by the rule of law.

Likewise, the Ecumenical Call to Just Peace recognizes the importance of national and international laws and politics to promote and protect peace with justice for all. However, there is also the recognition that a poetics must accompany and even precede a politics. Dylan sang that the answers to our most human and humane questions are “Blowing in the Wind.” Shelley too reveres the power of the Wind. His poem “Ode to the West Wind” reminds us that we can be poetic and prophetic lyres or wind harps in the world:

Make me thy lyre...
Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?¹¹

10 This quotation originates with Scottish politician Andrew Fletcher, who said "Let me write the songs of a nation and I don't care who writes its laws."

11 Shelly, "Ode," 227.

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