The International Year for the Culture of Peace: Was It Worthwhile?

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A B S T R A C T _ A major initiative of the United Nations system at the present time is the promotion of a culture of peace, and this found a specific expression in the millennial year (2000) being designated and commemorated by the UN as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. There were a range of activities to publicize the International Year. However, two specific initiatives associated with the UN were the Manifesto 2000 Project and the Culture of Peace News Network (CPNN), a UNESCO initiative to establish locally based websites on which individuals can post reports of local initiatives for peace or respond to media events supporting a culture of peace. The Manifesto 2000 Project involved the collection of signatures in support of a culture of peace, and in September 2000 some 50 million signatures were presented to the Millennial Session of the UN General Assembly in New York. This article examines the dimensions of the concept of a culture of peace and asks whether the International Year for the Culture of Peace was worthwhile. _

K E Y W O R D S _ counterviolence _ CPNN _ Gandhi _ intrapersonal peace _ Manifesto 2000 _ nonviolence _ UNESCO

What does a culture of peace involve? The background to what we might call the movement for a culture of peace is the realization that there needs to be cultural change or a change of social consciousness for there to be lasting peace. In effect, the culture of peace approach recognizes that peace is more than just the absence of armed conflict. The notion of a culture of peace has been outlined quite comprehensively within UN General Assembly Resolution 53/243 of September 1999, under the title 'Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace'. What is outlined within the Declaration and Programme of Action is an integrative approach to peace, involving attitudes, values and behaviours, and based upon a range of precepts, including promotion of non-violence, respect for human rights, respects for the right to development, respect for equal rights and opportunities for men and women, and respect for democracy, tolerance and cultural diversity. In some ways, it can be said that a culture of peace is encouraged by an international environment conducive to peace, although at the same time the culture of peace movement itself also aims to encourage an international environment conducive to peace.

In many ways it can also be said that the culture of peace movement represents a cultural rather than political response to the problem of violence. A key element within the notion of a culture of peace is non-violence theory, and particularly the Gandhian notion that violence cannot be resolved by counterviolence. Counterviolence (in the form of armed intervention) tends to exacerbate a situation – however laudable the motivation of the counterviolence. In many ways, the culture of peace movement reflects the trend within peace research and theory towards a greater emphasis on an intrapersonal interpretation of peace. One can trace in the work of influential writers within the field of peace research a greater tendency to seeking cultural solutions for the problem of war, including looking at differing emphases within occidental and oriental cosmologies, and the way this impacts upon the way we think about violence. The issue of culture also raises the issues of gender, and how this impacts on the social construction of violence. Johan Galtung is one writer within peace research who has increasingly concentrated upon the cultural dimensions of peace. Galtung is well known for his taxonomy of peace, comprising direct peace, structural peace and cultural peace (Galtung, 1997). However, notably, it seems to be cultural peace which has attracted most attention from Galtung in recent years.

How does the culture of peace relate to the key question of responding to armed conflict? In many ways the culture of peace represents an indirect response to the issue of armed conflict, in that the culture of peace movement aims to encourage a global ethos of non-violence, through which armed con- flict ceases to be a legitimate means of conflict resolution. Critics might well claim that such an approach is utopian or unrealistic, although one can argue that intervention (and certainly military intervention) is itself in reality the more unrealistic response, given what are often the poor prospects of success of military intervention. One of the most common motivations for military intervention this century has been the threat of genocide, and yet the historical record of genocide is that this phenomenon tends to flourish in the dislocation and social anarchy which war establishes. Ultimately, the response of a cultural approach to armed conflict is that one must work harder, through education and other means of changing global opinion, to work for a world of diminished inequalities and enhanced commitment to the principles undergirding a cultural of peace.

The culture of peace movement is not without challenges. I want to outline just three of these. At the outset, one of the central challenges is that there is sometimes a tendency to become rhetorical and even sermonic in dealing with the notion of a culture of peace. There is a danger in telling something which people already know that one actually increases a sense of powerlessness and frustration. In particular, I believe there is danger in telling people that we need a culture of non-violence. Why? The reason is that we are telling people something that they already know. One can well argue that there has been a widespread recognition throughout the last century of the futility of war. Historians often refer to war weariness. So too, I believe, one can refer to peace weariness, in that individuals experience normative fatigue when confronted with seemingly endless statements about the importance of peace. Perhaps part of the solution to the problem lies in recognizing and acknowledging such fatigue. The fatigue with the rhetoric of peace does not mean that the need for a culture of peace is any less genuine.

A second and related challenge to the culture of peace movement is that there is arguably a need for a non-verbal communication of a culture of peace. We know that the fundamental means whereby the learning process functions is through modelling. It is not so much what we say which is important, but what we do. This can be applied to the culture of peace. One can argue that what is needed is more a demonstration of the realities of a culture of peace, rather than rhetoric and pronouncements. It can be argued that pronouncements about peace very easily became inflated and ultimately worthless, because there is no countervailing reality. Language needs to refer to something to have any meaning. Again perhaps the solution to this challenge lies in recognizing that the problem exists. Indeed, if one looks closely at the UN documents on the culture of peace one will find repeated references to the importance of the application and grounding of the concept within daily interactions, as well as in the global context of interaction between nation-states.

A third related challenge to the culture of peace movement is that such an approach can become a substitute for establishing a thoroughgoing critique of global society, and particularly to the massive inequities associated with global capitalism. It can be argued that the culture of peace is very much an individualistic and bourgeoisified approach to peace, looking at how individuals should change their thinking and act more peaceably, and tending to downplay the importance of structural change. The emphasis is arguably on individual rather than systemic change. There is an implied critique of structural inequity within the official documentation for the culture of peace, such as within Resolution 53/243, although it is difficult to describe this critique as being clear and explicit. Again, perhaps the correct response is to recognize the limitations of the concept of the culture of peace, as it has thus far been developed. Perhaps what is needed is a more developed theory of a culture of peace, including a direct critique of the accepted certainties of the global system, including the nation-state system, nationalism, the global market economy, the gendered state and so forth. In other words, even if we do accept that the culture of peace is an individualistic approach, there is nothing to prevent individuals and collectivities going beyond this.

Has the International Year for the Culture of Peace been a worthwhile exercise? It is difficult to say. There seems to be widespread normative fatigue in response to yet another UN International Year, and it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that much of the recognition of the International Year by governments has been of an epideictic nature. Governments like to be seen in support of a culture of peace because it seems a noble and acceptable thing to do. However, at the same time social change can be a long-term

phenomenon, and the exercise may still be a valuable one. One can argue that it has taken some 50 years for the notion of universal human rights to gain widespread acceptance. Perhaps too it will take another 50 years for the notion of a culture of peace to gain widespread acceptance. In particular, just as it has taken 50 years for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to gain widespread acceptance, so too it may well take 50 years for the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace to find widespread acceptance. If this does turn out to be the case, then the effort expended on this particular International Year will have been worthwhile.

References

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