

Have peace activists abandoned Afghanistan?

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The US is spending as much on weapons as the next 20 arms-buying countries in the world.

While the war in Iraq triggered massive demonstrations across the globe, the ratcheting up of the number of troops in Afghanistan has generated no more than brief debates in parliaments. Obviously the intervention in Afghanistan is far more 'legitimate' than the invasion of Iraq, based as it was on false assumptions about the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Nonetheless, it is still significant that the Afghan war, with its high human costs, is accepted as inevitable and that even the world peace movement seems resigned to it. Man tends to resort to conflict as something natural and spontaneous. Only a society of law and order can control this tendency with any effectiveness. Over the centuries, the values and principles adopted by societies have grown more refined. For example, there is growing acceptance of the use of humanitarian intervention in conflicts that affect high numbers of civilians. In other words, it is now thought that wars are not supposed to exceed a certain level of barbarity.

Civilisation

It is worth asking whether or not the destruction of Dresden or Hiroshima could happen again without arousing universal moral condemnation, which the annihilation of civilian as opposed to military targets did not arouse in that epoch. Conflicts are characterised by the level of civilisation of the period in which they take place. The more primitive a society, the more frequent its conflicts and the more killing of defenceless civilians, women, and children.

Imagine a creature from another planet landing on earth and asking where he was. He is told that on earth societies are divided into nations. How do these nations relate to one another? the visitor asks, and is told that there is an institution called the United Nations that represents all countries and is charged with preventing wars between them.

Wars? the extraterrestrial asks, what are they? How do they work? They are conflicts fought with weapons, the traveller is informed, although the five permanent members of the Security Council have veto power and also happen to be responsible for 82 per cent of world arms sales, with the United States the leader by far. At this point the extraterrestrial gets back into his ship and leaves in search of a planet with more logical inhabitants and better suited for peace tourism.

It may be because of this lack of logic that major historical events usually awaken people's hope for a better future. The end of the Cold War aroused the expectation of a significant reduction in military spending and thus of a giant 'peace dividend' that could be invested in the development of the two-thirds of humanity in the south of the planet.

But this dividend never materialised, and today the US is spending as much on weapons as the next 20 arms-buying countries.

Obviously wars change. We are now in the grips of the theory of a 'clash of civilisations,' as the conflict with al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other Islamic movements is called. The theory posits that a struggle is underway between Judeo-Christian and Muslim civilisations.

The clash

This 'clash of civilisations' theory was introduced by author Samuel Huntington in an article in 1993, and much has been said and written about it since. However, there has been no true examination by the international community of the causes of this alleged clash, nor have any recommendations been generated to resolve it, except for a commission formed ten years ago by Spain and Turkey that brought together eminent figures from all areas and backgrounds to examine the topic. The primary conclusion reached was that there is no clash between civilisations, but rather specific conflicts within them.

It is in this context that we should examine the original objective of al-Qaeda to take control of the Arab world, and its subsequent fight against the infidels who supported corrupt governments of the area. Similarly, the commotion caused when an Italian minister wore a shirt with a caricature of the Prophet Mohammed, setting off protests that resulted in the deaths of 22 people in Libya, should be understood as a conflict within Christian civilisation.

It has already been 10 years since the UN General Assembly approved the commission's report and its recommendations for a 'plan of action for a culture of peace,' which is one of the most modern and ethical documents ever generated by the international community. Very little came of it since. Nonetheless, this effort raised the level of the civilisation we live in and makes war all the more detestable. Each wave of peace that breaks against the wall of violence brings its collapse a little closer.

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