

**The Absence of War Does Not Mean Peace**  
**A Black Theological Perspective**  
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Many discussions on war and peace address just war theory, pacifism, or a combination of both. The usual goal of these discussions is to figure out how we can avoid war and sustain peace. The term peace in these instances is being implicitly defined as a time free from war. The word peace can be misleading if it is only understood as the absence of war.

In the United States there are periods when the country is not at war, and many whites probably believe during these times the country is at peace. For many African-Americans historically, however, even during the times when there is an absence of war, an absence of peace still exists. The threat of harm is an on-going reality for many African-Americans during so called peaceful interludes.

To better understand why the absence of war does not mean peace for many African-Americans the following four themes will be explored:

- 1) the contradiction of the American promise
- 2) an unjust peaceful existence
- 3) King and Vietnam
- 4) reclaiming shalom as a true model for peace

**The Contradiction of the American Promise**

The contradictions African-Americans face in the United States are well documented. Historically within the military, one such contradiction was the segregation of troops during World War II. Although African-Americans fought for their country and died for their country, they did not enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts. The Tuskegee Airmen is just one example of African-Americans who trained separately and fought for their country.

The importance of the contradiction experienced by troops like the Tuskegee Airmen sets the stage for the Civil Rights Movement and the fight for rights. The struggles of individuals like the Tuskegee Airmen pushed America to answer questions like, "If someone is qualified to fight for her/his country, then why don't they enjoy the same benefits as their white counterparts?"

The contradiction between what America promises and what it practices has been an on-going dilemma for African-Americans. Theologically one way to express this contradiction is the call to justice within the prophetic tradition when Israel went astray. Israel often claimed one thing based upon its covenant with God, but practiced another. This is one of the reasons Martin Luther King, Jr. why often pointed out the theological contradiction of the American ideal. King stated:

Ever since the Founding Fathers of our nation dreamed this noble dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy, and on the other hand

we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles.

### **An Unjust Peaceful Existence**

The contradictions experienced by many African-Americans culminated in over twenty race riots between 1960 and 2005. These riots point toward the uneasy existence experienced by many African-Americans during the past forty years. Two of the worst riots were Watts in 1965 and Detroit in 1967. In both situations an infantry division was called in to keep the “peace.” These two riots resulted in over seventy people killed and hundreds injured. Many underlying reasons were given for the riots, including rage, disappointment, and the lack of economic means. Many African-Americans were frustrated with the status quo and the lack of progress on race matters.

Adding fuel to the fire for many blacks was the willingness of many whites to get involved in conflicts like Vietnam, but their (whites) unwillingness to address racial injustices in their own backyard. The status quo continued to be maintained in the United States even as America sought to change the circumstances of others in foreign lands. This is not a critique against challenging injustices wherever they occur, but it is to point out the hypocrisy experienced by blacks in the United States. The contradictions of segregation and the lack of economic opportunity were creating an uneasy existence for many African-Americans. In biblical language, many African-Americans felt like they were already barred from the Garden of Eden and had to watch while some whites wallowed there in peace.

Although progress has occurred in the past forty years, America still remains just an incident away from another race riot. The failure to address the deeper issues of racism embedded in American society during times of war or peace continues to create an uneasy tension for many African-Americans in this country. During times of war, like the present Iraq conflict, the unjust existence remains for many African-Americans, but is subsumed under the banner of “patriotism.” By patriotism, I do not mean supporting the troops during conflicts, but the more insidious notion of a blind allegiance to American imperialism.

Just as dangerous a mindset is the belief that the absence of war means all Americans are experiencing peace. There may be a false sense of peace in some white suburbs, but black urban ghettos are continuously under attack. James Cone supports this sentiment by arguing that the comfortable theologies of Euro-Americans cannot speak to the conditions faced by African-Americans living in urban ghettos. These conditions include issues like daily violence, drugs, and poverty. The reality of these conditions during times of peace and war mean many African-Americans never experience what some call peace.

### **King and Vietnam**

During the Vietnam conflict Martin Luther King, Jr. made the connection between the absurdity of fighting a foreign war while poor black and whites suffered. King claimed:

They must see the Americans as strange liberators. The Vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence in 1945 after a combined French and Japanese occupation and before the Communist revolution in China. They were led by Ho Chi Minh. Even though they quoted the American Declaration of Independence in their own document of freedom, we refused to recognize them. Our government...again fell victim to the deadly

Western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long.

King questioned the wisdom of getting involved in a foreign conflict on multiple levels. First, King was concerned that those asked to fight for America were the very individuals adversely affected by American policy decisions. Second, King was concerned about the use of resources going into the war effort that could be used to help rebuild the infrastructures of those suffering in this country. Third, King understood the hypocrisy of some Americans calling for African-Americans to stop rioting in cities over injustices, but supporting violence overseas to achieve justice.

What King outlines for us is another form of just-war theory that would be better entitled unjust-war theory. Our reasons for going to war may be unjust if we are advocating another country do what we are unwilling to do in our own context. I am not suggesting there is never a justification for war or that the United States should ignore injustices occurring in other countries. The United States, however, needs to re-evaluate what it means by peace and not assume the absence of war means a peaceful existence for all Americans.

### **Shalom**

If America's understanding of peace is inadequate, then what is an alternative? The Hebrew notion of shalom is one possibility. Shalom means peace, but not in the passive sense of no existing conflicts. Shalom means peace in an active sense that advocates for the well-being of all people. I am suggesting that America needs to understand peace in the latter manner and not the former. An active peace that promotes the well-being of people means America understands it must make a commitment to eradicating the injustices in its own context.

Two theological ideas can help move America in the direction of an active peace. First, we need to challenge our personal concepts of the image of God. One of the reasons it is easy to be comfortable with a passive peace is we see God in our own image and not the image of those suffering. King's "unjust-war theory" pushes us to see God's image in those who are suffering and not to just focus on our own image which only serves our goals. Second, we must practically love our neighbors in this country. King pushes us to be good stewards of available resources that can be used to re-build inadequate infrastructures.

I believe, thinking from a black theological perspective, that framing the question in terms of the absence of war means peace is problematic. The challenge for America is what do we mean by peace? If it is simply a passive peace that means the absence of war, then really there is no peace. An active peace advocating for the well-being of all people moves America in the right direction because it challenges us to remember those suffering in times of war or peace.

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