

Human Conflict from a Theistic Worldview

by Ted Slater

Introduction

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus taught. On another occasion he said, “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.” A high calling it is to be both initiator and resolver of conflict. Jesus instructed his followers to prepare for the conflict which often accompanies proclamation of the truth, and to rejoice in it. On the other hand, they were instructed to act as ambassadors of reconciliation, offering people the opportunity to experience peace with their creator and his creation. Jesus wasn’t insisting that others do something unless he was prepared to do the same: in his being crucified he acted as both peacemaker and focal point of conflict.

Christians are called to be peacemakers. In order to do so, they must allow themselves to be placed by God in situations characterized by conflict, perhaps causing disruption in the process. Conflict is to the peacemaker, one might metaphorize, as a tumor is to the surgeon. It is to be identified, brought to the surface, and dealt with appropriately.

Ideas, the saying goes, have consequences. In view of this, the following essay approaches conflict from a theoretical angle. It is the author’s contention that by understanding the general rules which govern conflict, one might be better prepared to resolve conflict in various situations.

Definitions

A misunderstanding of certain key words — worldview, conflict, peace, and reconcile — precludes any scholarly discussion of conflict. It is proper, then, to discuss what these words mean.

Worldview

A worldview, according to Nash (1992) is “a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality” (p. 16). With the correct worldview, one becomes able to make sense of phenomena and better understand truth. Those who hold incorrect worldviews, consequently, are bound to draw incorrect conclusions from received data. The interaction of people who hold opposing worldviews is bound to be characterized by conflict.

The Judeo-Christian monotheist believes certain things about God, ultimate reality, knowledge, ethics, and humanity. God, for example, is infinite and yet thoroughly interested in those he created. He has designed nature to behave in a predictable way, but chooses to involve himself as he sees fit. God's involvement is seen as miraculous, since his intercession seems to oppose known natural law. The theistic worldview goes on to posit, for example, that reality is meaningful, that God communicates with his creation, that people can (to a degree) trust their senses, that truth exists and its opposite is false, and that humanity is fallen.

The theist's model is Christ, who resolved the conflict which separates people from their creator by interposing himself, placing himself in the crux of conflict. His manner of bringing about reconciliation was, by definition, excruciating; the Christian theist's should be as well. After all, Jesus declared that his followers are to take up their crosses daily, following him.

Conflict

Conflict, according to the 1828 version of Webster's Dictionary (1985), is "a striking or dashing against each other.... A struggling with difficulties; a striving to oppose." According to sociologist Lewis Coser, it consists of "a struggle over values ... [or over] claims to scarce status, power, and resources" (cited in Jandt, 1985, p. 25). People experience conflict when their ideas regarding something are violently oppositional. A conflict, for example, might occur for apparently amoral reasons such as when two people fight over ownership of limited resources or when one is inhibited from achieving a particular goal, or for clearly moral reasons such as opinions about abortion.

Conflict is seen by some as essentially bad and by others as essentially good. It had been common for most people to consider conflict a destroyer, intrinsically evil, that freedom from conflict is ideal. After all, conflict prevents people from experiencing peace. Consequently, those who were seen as being responsible for raising the conflict should be eliminated (Jandt, 1985, pp. 23-24).

Others propose that conflict actually brings about peace. Hegelians, for example, might say that conflict is like a furnace which produces wondrous new compounds. William Blake said essentially the same thing when he wrote, "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence" (cited in Gellrich, 1988, p. 23). The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno considered conflict the ideal environment to produce better people, as he indicated through the protagonist of one of his works, whose goal was to "provoke discontent in others, the primary motive of all progress and all good" (Unamuno, 1966, p. 704). Elsewhere he wrote: "Forgive me if I have disturbed you more than was necessary or inevitable, more than I intended.... And may God give you no peace but glory!" (Unamuno, 1972, p. 358). Water from a stagnant pond is unhealthy.

Others see conflict as potentially good for other reasons; it can be good when it is brought about by illumination of falsehood. These people might argue that that furnace is best which purifies and eliminates dross, leaving simple truth. If the material hadn't been tainted in the first place, it wouldn't be necessary to run it through a furnace. Those who hold this view posit that conflict arises because individuals misunderstand truth. Marcus Aurelius (1974), while maintaining that conflict is innately wrong, held that it results from people's ignorance of truth. Writing during the second century, Aurelius elaborated, "Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, illwill, and selfishness — all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil.... To obstruct each other is against Nature's law — and what is irritation or aversion but a form of obstruction?" (p. 45). If this is true, then conflict is inevitable. It is not a matter of whether or not to engage in it, but when, why, and how.

Conflict, while it does benefit fallen humanity in that it illuminates sin and purifies those with humble hearts, has its source in evil. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). These spirits affect earthly conflicts, and Christians who aim to resolve conflict must consider their effects on the situation in which they find themselves. Any resolution which comes about will do so as a result of mediation on both the physical and the spiritual levels.

Peace

Peace, unlike conflict, is something that everyone seeks. St. Augustine, for example, wrote that the evil person abhors "the just peace of God, and loves its own unjust peace, but it cannot help loving peace of one kind or other" (cited in Bourke, 1964, p. 215). Peace is the resolution of conflict. It is "a state of quiet or tranquillity; freedom from disturbance or agitation.... Harmony, concord, a state of reconciliation between parties at variance" (Webster, 1985). Another dictionary defines peace simply as "freedom from war, disturbance, or dissension" (Onions, 1979, p. 659).

Peace is conformity to the standard of order established by God. The concept of conflict being a struggle between differing understandings of truth finds its way in the writing of Augustine, who explains in his *City of God*:

Peace between man and God is the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law. Peace between man and man is well-ordered concord. Domestic peace is the well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is a similar concord among the citizens. The peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of

one another in God. The peace of all things is the tranquillity of order. Order is the distribution which allots things equal and unequal, each to its own place. (cited in Bourke, 1964, pp. 216-217)

In order for parties to experience peace, then, they must conform themselves to the standard of truth established by God; by doing so, they will experience peace: the tranquillity of order. If people don't understand what God's standard is, they are unlikely to be able to conform themselves to it. People lack peace, or experience conflict, when confronted with disordered phenomena. In order to be a peacemaker, one must better understand truth and its source and illuminate those whose understanding is darkened.

Reconciliation

To achieve peace in the midst of conflict, it is sometimes necessary to reconcile the opposing forces. Reconciliation means "to bring again into friendly relations or agreement ... make compatible" (Onions, 1979, p. 747). It usually has to do more with affect (e.g., friendship) than with cognitive or logical factors. The implication is that two opposing ideas cannot (outside of Hegel's dialectic) become reconciled. A moral stance and an opposing stance, for example, cannot reasonably become reconciled.

Christians are called to be both reconciled and reconcilers. God "reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.... He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18-20a). It follows that at certain times Christian ambassadors are to make peace through peaceful means; at other times, through waging war.

Reasons for Engaging in Conflict

Some people argue that Christians should be motivated to engage in and resolve conflict out of obedience to God and truth, more than out of a pragmatic desire to bring about a change. In other words, they should engage in conflict because it is the right thing to do in a certain circumstance. The author of *The Waste Land and Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot (1980), said some things which apply directly to this idea of pronouncing truth, accepting the possibly conflictual consequences:

There should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue. (p. 144)

Eliot, who late in his life converted to Christianity, considered it sufficient to offer the truth because that was the correct thing to do. While pragmatists and new libertarians might concern themselves with recounting what they considered truth in order to bring about change, Eliot saw it as a person's duty to set forth right words and ideas, simply because that is the right thing to do.

Colson (1989), decades later, reiterated the ideas put forth by Eliot when he wrote the following:

[I]t is not the prospect of success nor some grand vision of changing history and saving the world that should motivate the Christian. No, it is duty alone that should compel us to act in the arena in which God has placed us. (p. 112)

Peacemakers, knowing that ideas have consequences, aim to speak the truth of the matter, the kernel which leads their listeners to a correct understanding of the facts concerning an event or subject. By growing more intimately involved with the Truth, they might more accurately perceive and interpret the truth. By knowing the Truth as one might know a friend, one might better know and recount the facts about the truth. In doing so, the conflict might become resolved, both parties becoming conformed to God's standard of truth, and as a result experience what Augustine calls God's "tranquillity of order." On the other hand, if either party refuses to submit to the Truth, agreeing to allow reconciliation to take place, discord may persist, for "how can two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3).

Martin Luther saw it as the Christian's duty to engage in certain conflicts. "If I profess," he wrote, "with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved" (cited in Schaeffer, 1968, p. 18). Those who consider themselves Christians should engage in battle with the same enthusiasm as the loyal soldier, out of obedience to those in authority over them.

On the other hand, it appears that one should engage in conflict only when "a reasonable chance of securing a just peace" is possible (Payne & Payne, 1987, p. 43). Along the same lines, Jesus warned his followers not to "give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6). Operative words include "dogs" and "may": it takes discernment to determine a party's species; and even if it is a dog, there is a chance that it may not trample the proverbial pearls.

This concept of considering the effects of one's labors prior to engaging in an activity is brought up again when Jesus says, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone

who sees it will ridicule him” (Luke 14:28-29). Through a combination of acquired wisdom and guidance by the Holy Spirit, one might come to understand whether to expend one’s energy engaging in conflict or not.

How to Engage in Conflict

It should be the intention of those engaged in conflict to conform themselves and others to the standard of order established by God. The attitude of one engaged in conflict should be joy, as highlighted by James:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials [or conflicts] of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

The Christian should be confident that the conflict will lead to conformity to Christ — which is true maturity and completeness. The trials, or conflicts, that one experiences are not without meaning; instead, God has arranged them so as to bring his people into maturity, or conformity to the image of Christ. This confidence that God will ultimately resolve the conflict in his favor enables the Christian to experience joy, confident that God, who began the work, is faithful to complete it.

This section of James’ letter goes on to explain that God is prepared to communicate to his people the best means of resolving the conflict: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). While one trained in conflict resolution might be quite skilled at determining the best means for reconciling a particular conflict, the Christian theist understands that God interacts with his creation, interceding and communicating with them his wisdom.

Just as Christians might consult their Creator directly, and sense a leading as a result of God’s communicating through his Holy Spirit, he has devised another means to understand his will in a certain conflict-filled circumstance: Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes that the Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15b-17). The words in the Bible somehow carry the same weight as the words spoken “in the quiet place” by the Holy Spirit, whose words are always in concord with the written Word.

The Bible, however, not only provides “ammunition” for those involved in conflict, it outlines the steps one should go through in the process of resolving it. In Matthew’s account of the Gospel, Jesus outlines the four stages through which a Christian should proceed in the escalation of conflict. They include the following: 1)

Attempt to resolve the conflict in a dyad. If the conflict is resolved, good; if not, 2) introduce another person into the conflict. If the conflict continues, 3) bring the situation before the church. Finally, if the conflict remains unsettled, the party refusing to conform to God's standard of truth and order, 4) "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17). The facts which constitute the conflict should be increasingly made public.

Milton (1952) understood that bringing conflicting ideas out into the open would result in the truth's being made clear. In his *Areopagitica*, published in 1644, he wrote:

The temple of Janus with his two controversial faces might now not unsignificantly be set open. And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter? Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing.... For who knows not that Truth is strong, next to the Almighty? She needs no policies, nor strategems, nor licensings to make her victorious (p. 409).

In such a "free and open encounter," the truth will be recognized as such, and righteous people will accept and embrace it. There exists a "self-righting principle" which assures truth's ultimate victory. Milton's purpose in writing *Areopagitica* was twofold: first, he condensed the history of censorship to show how it degenerates cultures; and second, he argued that censorship is evil and un-Christian in itself. We should encourage the free exchange of ideas, be they conflictual or not, with the faith that truth will someday win.

The Apostle Paul explains that, ideally, the conflict should be conducted in a civilized manner: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6). The conflict is to be discussed without either party being blindly judgmental. Instead, each should offer the other grace, while maintaining a high regard for truth as communicated through Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Salt preserves and makes eating certain foods a more pleasant experience. Food which is unsalted may be unsavory, and may have become poisonous. The conflictual discussion which lacks "salt" could degenerate into an unpleasant, sickening fight. On the other hand, although eating saltless food might be an unenjoyable experience, one would not last long on a diet which consisted of salt alone. Similarly, one's dialogical health would be impaired if his speech were pleasant, but insubstantial and lacking truth. An approach which effectively settles conflict is characterized by grace, and also by the following: truth, righteousness, a readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, God's word, and prayer (Ephesians 6:13-18).

In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to understand the audience. If the two parties have assumed views fundamentally different from each other, they might have no appropriate “dowel rod” on which to hang ideas presented to them. Christian journalist G.K. Chesterton explains how Christians should go about engaging in a conflictual discussion over ideas with, for example, an atheist: “We must either not argue with a man at all, or we must argue on his grounds and not ours” (cited in Lea, 1947, p. 98). It does no good to converse with an Italian monolingual using English. In the same way, communication is pointless if parties from different worldviews engage in conflict, using alien communication approaches and words which mean different things to each.

These words represent ideas, and ideas have consequences. A clear understanding of the meaning of words should precede any meaningful discussion. As someone has noted, “He who defines the words frames the argument.” The wordsmith Chesterton writes:

What is the good of words if they aren't important enough to quarrel over? Why do we choose one word more than another if there isn't any difference between them? If you called a woman a chimpanzee instead of an angel, wouldn't there be a quarrel about a word? If you're not going to argue about words, what are you going to argue about? Are you going to convey your meaning to me by moving your ears? The Church and the heresies always used to fight about words, because they are the only things worth fighting about. (Marlin et al., 1986, pp. 368-369)

Christians should continue to engage in conflict over ideas and the words which clothe them.

Those who are confronted with ideas different from their own are likely to engage in a conflict of some sort with the source of those ideas. If those who originated the ideas construct their arguments effectively, gracefully salted, the conflict can become unusually pleasant and resolve favorably. C.S. Lewis, while an atheist, struggled with Chesterton's writings, whose ideas often conflicted with his own. Lewis (1955) writes:

Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love.... I did not need to accept what Chesterton said in order to enjoy it. His humor was of the kind which I like best — not “jokes” embedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularly, but the humor which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the “bloom” on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter, but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly. (pp. 190-191)

And the war of ideas is a life and death battle, for ideas have consequences. Those who win will have conformed themselves to God and his true order, and will engage those with opposing ideas in a graceful manner, following direction provided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, and equipped with materials gleaned from Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

It is necessary that Christian peacemakers often be in the midst of conflict. With joy, they should engage in the battle of ideas, confident that their turbulent experiences are not meaningless, and that it is the means God has chosen by which to conform people to his order and his Son. They should struggle to see themselves and others come into a peace which St. Augustine calls “the tranquillity of order.” Christians should, however, be “motivated not by a desire to make an impact on society but by obedience to God’s Word and a desire to please him” (Colson, 1989, p. 136).

All conflict will become resolved — if not temporally, then at the close of the age. The goats will be separated from the sheep; untruth will be separated from truth. The creator may see fit, however, to resolve conflict before it is presented to him at the Judgment. In that case, he may himself intercede, through his Spirit alone, or through his people who are guided by his Spirit.

Ultimately, though, it is not a record of our proclamations of truth that will be presented to the Maker of Standards. We will enter into Paradise not with commendations for our having known how to discern and argue the truth, but with the gentle smile of One who longs for us to know the Truth, personally.

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