

# Debates Within the Peace Movement

by Metta Spencer

The Western peace movement is far from a unified campaign. While most activists can agree on enough issues to collaborate effectively, many differences do divide them. Four debates are particularly important, and their outcomes will be fateful for the success or failure of the movement. These concern: (1) the breadth of scope of the movement's agenda; (2) pacifism or the principle of a just war; (3) nonalignment; and (4) NATO membership.

## 1. Single Issue vs. Broader Political Movement

What are activists working against — nuclear weapons, or the political and social grievances that convince people of the *need* for nuclear weapons? "The sword comes into the world," according to the *Talmud*, "from justice denied or too long delayed." If we opt for addressing the injustices *behind* wars, our agenda must expand beyond the abolition of nuclear weapons. We will have to address such inter-dependent issues as: the environmental destructiveness of radiation and the poisonous wastes of a military economy; the economics, health and safety of nuclear energy; obstacles to political freedom and other human rights; the financial excesses of the military, whether spent on conventional, nuclear or chemical, hardware; the division of Europe; and the conduct of proxy wars in the Third World, to name only a few.

Everyone can see that

these are linked, but activists differ as to the tactical soundness of addressing them in a comprehensive program of political action. The prevailing opinion in Canada is that disarmament campaigns should be confined to nuclear arms, since substantial agreement exists among those who object to those weapons, whereas there is no consensus on a more comprehensive program. Inclusiveness of agenda, according to that analysis, would diminish support for the movement.

The other view holds that no single issue can be resolved without simultaneously solving the other problems that are relevant to the proposed changes. Thus, unless the Soviets return their troops to their own country, Western and Central Europeans will feel too insecure to relinquish NATO's nuclear missiles. That being the case, such related questions as, say, the status of the two Germanys, must be addressed in preparing the conditions for any real end to the Cold War.

Or take another example: Nuclear

weapons will be clung to until there is confidence that, after the superpowers dismantle theirs, other nations will not build new ones. To provide such confidence, it will be necessary to greatly reduce the accessibility of fissile material, and to do that, it will be necessary to curtail nuclear power reactors, all of which produce plutonium. Since nuclear power and nuclear weapons production are being intrinsically linked, neither issue can be solved by itself. Only a comprehensive solution can succeed.

In Europe the comprehensive approach is widely preferred, especially by the Green Movement. Also, a group of leading independent peace activists in both Eastern and Western Europe have developed a comprehensive "Memorandum" which is a common program toward which they all agree to work. It is extremely wide-ranging in content. In Canada, on the other hand, the Peace Movement so far has mainly been a narrowly defined single-issue campaign. This seems to be changing, but it is too early to say so with certainty.

## 2. Pacifism vs. Just War Doctrines

Disarmament activists of the current generation do not argue much about nonviolence or "just wars." Those who personally are committed to nonviolence do not want to glibly criticize others for resorting to violence when they lack alternative means of defence against oppressors.

Moreover, a minority of peace activists are con-



Metta Spencer

vinced pacifists. Those who *are* pacifists argue that nothing short of abolishing war will be a stable solution to our problems. The technology of war is so vast that all wars threaten the survival of humankind. There is no solution but to give up all resort to violence, however worthy may be the cause for which weapons are employed. Violence begets violence; vengeance calls for an endless cycle of retaliation and counter-retaliation. Only a commitment to peaceful but vigilant processes of dispute-settlement will break this historical cycle of wars.

The typical nuclear disarmament activist takes the opposite view, maintaining that unwillingness to defend one's interests with violence ultimately invites victimization. Nonviolence is a common preference but a rare commitment. Christianity, at least after the first few centuries, has mainly approved the use of force under certain circumstances — for example, when more lives can be saved by its use than by refusal to fight. "Just war theorists" point to Central America and South Africa today as proof that a commitment to justice seems to require revolutionary violence. The structures of oppression in those places are so grave that a swift, successful use of violence would seem a welcome relief.

The relationship is uneasy between the nuclear disarmament movement (containing, as it does, a pacifist branch) and the groups that explicitly support armed revolutions in say, Nicaragua or South Africa. Disarmament activists gladly promote such projects as the "Tools for Peace" campaign, which collects needed domestic supplies for Nicaraguans. However, the pacifists among them have balked at promoting violence by the Sandinistas or the African National Congress — even for strictly defensive military actions. They point out that efforts to *resolve* conflicts are regrettably incompatible with efforts to *win* conflicts.

Those who hold strictly to nonviolent

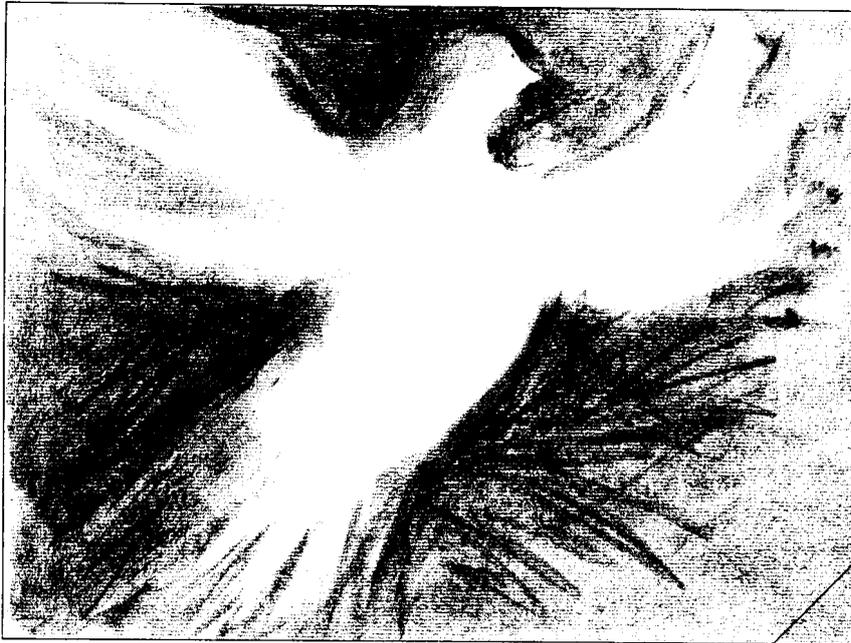


Illustration by Carol Cohen

Courtesy: TDN

methods maintain that the means of attaining justice are as important as the goal itself. After all, the outcome of any plan may turn bitter, as in the many cases of noble revolutions that bring tyranny instead of liberty or justice. Therefore, instead of justifying their actions in terms of high future goals (which are never certain), they try to be scrupulous about using *methods* that are worthy. Influenced by Gandhi, they define peace as the process of seeking social change through moral, humane means. "There is no way to peace," as A.J. Muste noted. "Peace is the way."

### 3. Nonalignment vs. Criticizing Only Our Side

A third dispute concerns whether to criticize both superpowers and their respective hegemonic fiefdoms even-handedly, or to limit criticisms to the mistaken policies of the Western side alone. This dispute was painfully significant throughout the pre-Gorbachev regimes, when vast changes were so obviously needed in both the Eastern and Western blocs.

Before the 1980s the peace movement in the West tended to be characterized by anti-US sentiment. After that period, a new wing of the peace movement grew: the 'nonaligned' approach, which sides with neither bloc, but aims to overcome the bloc system itself by enlarging the

space between the two polarized camps. This approach is taken with a view to influencing the opinions of the relatively right wing in Western societies — those who remain keenly conscious of the Soviet actions that deprive multitudes of their freedom.

The two camps of activists have often been too antagonistic even to march together in disarmament parades, since the nonaligned participants insist on protesting against the missiles of both sides, whereas others would protest only against those of the Americans.

The nonaligned peace movement does not portray the USA and the USSR as mirror images of one another, but as having dissimilar flaws. In particular, they point out the abuses of human rights in the Soviet Union, as well as Soviet military adventures in Afghanistan and Africa.

Fortunately, the grounds for this debate are greatly diminishing as a result of the extraordinary reforms going on within the Soviet Union. While the nonaligned group contains many who remain skeptical of the depth or genuineness of these reforms, there is far less to complain about than in previous periods. The Soviet Union has, in fact, adopted almost the whole program of peace activists — such as nuclear weapon free zones; reductions in conventional weaponry; a commitment to non-offensive defence; openness to extensive verification of disarmament; the use of the United Nations for peace-keeping; and the eventual abolition of weapons of mass destruction. When Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is effected and the promise of openness and democracy is completely fulfilled (which is not yet the case), the complaints lodged against them by the nonaligned movement will certainly diminish sharply.

In Europe nonalignment is the dominant perspective. While it is gaining strength in Canada, it may still be a minority view here.

#### 4. Alliance Membership vs. Alternative Defence

Peace activists who accept the use of military force for self-defence do not necessarily accept participation in military alliances. Some of them adhere instead to policies of "non-offensive defence" or "nonprovocative defence." Thus they may advocate withdrawal from NATO and preparation for defending against invaders — equipped (as a matter of principle) only with weapons that would be useless for aggressive actions against another country. This is based on the fact that the possession of offensive capability inevitably makes adversaries nervous, and often prompts them to retaliate in an arms race or even a pre-emptive strike. A nonprovocative military posture, by showing opponents that their victory would not come easily, inhibits attack without, however, making the opponents fear for their own safety. This approach provides as much military security as can be had, while maintaining the conditions for friendly relations.

Fairly conventional military thinking is, however, still represented within the peace movement. Many activists believe that adversarial relations are still the order of the day. They oppose the dismantling of NATO on grounds that it is "isolationist" and would be destabilizing. They hold that the nations that allow themselves to be vulnerable to attack only tempt aggressive nations to strike them.

#### A Correlation of Opinions

The views adopted on these four issues do not vary randomly. In general, the 'nonaligned' camp tends to believe in the comprehensive, as opposed to the focused, single-issue approach to mobilizing opinion. Those activists, on the other hand, who are loath to criticize the Soviet Union tend to work with a "single issue campaign."

There is also a correlation between commitment to nonviolence and opposition to military alliances. There is an obvious logic behind the connection: If a person does not believe in using threats or force at all she is unlikely to believe in participating in alliances designed to improve the effectiveness of threats and violence.

I say 'she' for good reason. There is an

evident relationship between gender and opinion on these two issues, nonviolence and alliance membership. Women are among the most radical opponents to militarism — both in Canada and abroad. Women in the peace movement (and they outnumber the men) tend not to dwell much on the fine points of military procurement and strategy — such as how many fighter planes or nuclear submarines to buy. They focus instead on the development of alternative peaceable means of resolving international conflict, such as through strengthening World Law and the United Nations system. Many women are convinced that Canada, lacking any real enemies, could function quite nicely with a small fraction of its current military force and that such a cutback would benefit humanity's security by diverting resources to the solution of genuine human needs.

Some men, of course, agree on these points. For example, the New Democratic Party has long been committed to withdrawal from NATO if it comes to power. The party could not hold to such a position without the concurrence of both sexes. On the other hand, as the party rises in the opinion polls and smells the possibility of victory, its generally unpopular promise to quit NATO gathers salience. If it is not reversed, it will be largely because women peace activists, such as the Voice of Women, create an uproar at the prospect.

Nevertheless, however useful uproars can be, something more is also required. Credible military alternatives must be proposed and the public must be persuaded of their effectiveness. Because the anti-alliance doctrine is upheld by both the radical pacifist faction and by numerous military experts, two suggestions for alternative defence have already been put forward which are, in most respects, compatible. One is the suggestion of military journalist Gwynne Dyer that Canada become explicitly neutral and reclaim its independence from its neighbor, as Finland has successfully done *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. The other proposal comes from Veterans Against Nuclear Arms. Both of these proposals display a much tougher approach to security than the fervent nonviolence promoted by the radical women of the movement.

The prospects are favorable, therefore, for the advancement of public discourse

on at least one of these debates — that of alliance membership. Some of the other debates are moving ahead more slowly. In particular, the Canadian movement is disappointingly slow in developing a comprehensive agenda. It is not effective to run a single issue campaign attacking first one weapon system and then the next. This leaves activists in a 'reactive' rather than 'pro-active' mode of operation, ill-equipped to answer the inevitable questions that arise whenever any discussion of disarmament moves beyond the initial conversation. For all their other weaknesses, the Green Parties of Europe are further ahead in developing a program to rectify the entire array of problems surrounding nuclearism and militarism. These issues form an agenda of inter-dependent topics. The Canadian peace movement has become considerably more sophisticated in its analyses, but it has not given itself permission to propose a genuinely comprehensive program. We must start thinking several moves ahead, and proposing preparations for the many ramifications of disarmament. A full public debate of all four of these issues is needed for the development of a clear, convincing, politically coherent program of nuclear disarmament.

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