Paper Abstract

War and Peace as Liberal Arts
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Abstract: The Common Good and Just Peacemaking: Abraham Kuyper’s and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Discipleship for a Better Worldliness

Central to the issue of war and peace is the notion of the common good. Whether nations wage war, or whether they wage peace, they do so in the name of what is best for society. The task of a liberal arts education in addressing such complex and pressing matters is not to teach formulaic responses to when and whether war or peace might be for the common good. Rather, a liberal arts education equips students with the cross-disciplinary acumen that is necessary not only to evaluate diverse and often opposing viewpoints, but also to construct creatively new models and provide new resources to address these complex and ever-evolving issues. This paper specifically seeks to engage often overlooked historical, theological, and ethical resources to help revive a contemporary vision of the common good. Thus equipped, the paper will connect its notion of the common good with the recent work in the Just Peacemaking Initiative, and will specifically argue for a robust engagement in Just Peacemaking’s Practice Norms.

This paper advances a vision of the common good that is based upon a nuanced dialogue between the Dutch Calvinist tradition of common grace and the German Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christ-centered model of being-for the other. Historical Dutch Calvinism – specifically the “neo-Calvinism” of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck that emerged during the late nineteenth century and continued into the middle of the following century – provides a rich tradition of theological engagement of the common good in the wider political realm. Kuyper’s vision of the “common grace” that is inherent within God’s sovereignty made room for, and eventually encouraged, all religions to participate publicly in society. This insight is particularly important for the paper’s engagement with the interfaith aspect of Just Peacemaking. The paper’s concept of the common good becomes even more robust when the Dutch tradition of common grace is placed in dialogue with the particularly Christ-centered thought of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). Taken together, these two diverse traditions sharpen each other and provide a theological and practical model for affirming and bolstering participation in the Just Peacemaking Initiative.