A Humanistic Approach to Peace: the Liberal Art and Peacemaking; a Critique and a Proposition

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Abstract:
I want to suggest that a deep connection stands to be made between peace and the liberal arts, that making this deep connection requires no less than a paradigm shift in the arenas of peace and conflict today (both academic and practical), and that just such a paradigm shift may be exactly what humanity needs in its ever-present quest for peace. I make my argument here by drawing on an analysis of the fields of peace and conflict resolution, my experience as an educator in the liberal arts and my experiences researching the Northern Irish peace process.

In this essay is a contrast between a more technical approach to peace to a more humanistic one, first showing how the technical approach is so well-established in arenas of peace and conflict resolution as to be paradigmatic, then arguing that peace would be furthered by a more humanistic approach. With the technical approach, the absence of peace is seen as symptomatic of a broken machine (society), to be fixed through the techne and savior-faire of experts (politicians, economists, peace scholars, conflict resolution experts). Here the liberal arts are one more tool in the peacemaker’s toolbox, though a supplemental and secondary tool to those of, say, politics and economics. With the humanistic approach questions of conflict or peace are envisioned as a great moral, even spiritual, drama, played out through history on an earthly stage. The question becomes less “by what design do we corral human individuals into a workable social system?” and more “what thing of goodness can we make of the human condition?” Peacemaking becomes less about fixing broken systems and more about human flourishing and shaping human character into something amenable to peace. Drawing on my time in Northern Ireland I argue that the humanistic approach must command as much legitimacy in our approach to peace as the technical approach does today. More, I suggest how the liberal arts have a special role to play in both shifting our view towards the humanistic paradigm and in the “work” of making and maintaining peace via this more humanistic approach.