

## **HOLMES, TAFT AND PEACEMAKING (by Charlot Martin)**

We are not allowed to congregate yet, and, because of this, we lack the opportunity of witnessing an actual reenactment of a debate. This means we will not have the chance to duplicate the electrifying performance given to us by Tom and Richard during our first Sabbatical Sermon. Like that is a possibility anyway. Instead, I will summarize what must have been a great chest thumper of a debate between the former president of the United States, William Howard Taft, and John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Church of the Messiah in NYC. Perhaps most of the thumping took place on Taft's chest by Taft himself but Holmes managed to hang in there.

One hundred and three years ago, the war to end all wars, World War One began, the first in a series. Soon after, two months or so, congress passed the Espionage Act. Speaking against the war, encouraging draft resistance and conscientious objection, were all criminalized under this act. Several hundred were arrested because of this. Freedom of the press was even denied.

The General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian churches took place in Montreal Canada. I could not find any correlation between the new restrictions in the U.S. and the relative freedoms in Canada as to why this conference was held there instead of here but maybe it was just their turn to have it there.

John Holmes prepared a Report of the Council in which he outlined the different attitudes about the war among the Unitarians. He identified four groups, being:

- 1) Those who agreed with the president that the allies were battling to make the world a safe place for democracy and holding Germany and German allies were accountable for being the aggressors.
- 2) Those who supported the war effort but felt unsure about who to blame for the aggression.
- 3) Those who felt the war must be brought to an immediate end even if it meant peace without victory.
- 4) Those who were pacifists and opposed to not only the current war but all war in general.

John Holmes was in the fourth group, the smallest one. He concluded in the report his hope that churches could develop a ministry of reconciliation and create a gospel of peace.

The president of the council, Taft, was outraged by this report. He expected all Unitarians to firmly support the war effort. Demanding a unity of position by the Unitarians, Taft made a motion stating that, Resolved, that it is the sense of this Unitarian Conference that this war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world; that we, as the Unitarian body approve of the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on this war, as restrictive as they may be..."

Holmes responded by proclaiming, "I am a pacifist...I hate war, and I hate this war; and so long as I live I will have nothing to do with this or any other war." In making the report he only wanted to show that there were many different opinions held by Unitarians. Apparently, this was unusual back then but is now something we have come to expect.

Taft argued that it was necessary for Unitarians to display only one opinion among them. When "our house is afire" it is not the right time to "argue whether the firemen are using the right kind of water," he orated.

Taft's motion carried 236 in favor and 9 opposed. Over the next few months, the board of the American Unitarian Association decided to deny aid to congregations with anti-war ministers leaving them without their pulpits. Holmes resigned his fellowship with the AUA in protest but kept his church after renaming it Community Church of New York.

Holmes went on to play central roles in founding the ACLU and the NAACP and the War Resisters League. He is also remembered for widely introducing Gandhi to the United States.

I am not sure what ever happened to Taft...maybe he became the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or something. I do know that about six years after his death, the General Assembly of the Association decided to recant its denial of aid to ant-war congregations and it is now depended upon to support pacifism.

## **PEACEMAKING**

Here is a question:

Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?

Paul Razor\* writes "we should avoid getting caught up in a debate between just war and pacifism." Sharon Welch\*\* agrees and suggests a third way exists that includes "joint efforts to prevent war, stop genocide, and repair the damage caused by armed conflict."

Welch calls this third way peacemaking and Razor describes it as prophetic nonviolence.

The third way has three components:

---Peacekeeping---early intervention to stop genocide and prevent large-scale war.

---Peacemaking---bringing hostile parties to agreement, negotiating equitable and sustainable peace agreements that include attention to the pressing need for post-conflict restoration and reconciliation.

---Peacebuilding---the creation of long-term structures for redressing injustice and resolving ongoing conflict as well as addressing the root causes of armed conflict, economic exploitation, and political marginalization.

Peacemaking seeks to position itself as an alternative to both just war theory and pacifism. Whether it is able to provide an alternative path and help bring stability and peace to our planet remains to be seen.

\*Paul Razor is a Unitarian Universalist theologian.

\*\*Sharon Welch is a Unitarian Universalist ethicist.