

*Dear S&S*

### **Do humanistic values imply pacifism?**

Your editorial (*Self & Society*, Ma 1999) asks: 'Do humanistic values imply pacifism?' As a life-long pacifist – a conscientious objector in the Second World War and European Public Affairs Director of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War during the Cold War – I am convinced that being human means, as George Fox said, 'living in that spirit which takes away the occasion of all war.' It is not in the nature of a human being to take part in mass murder, which is what war is.

During the war I was a member of the Friends ambulance Unit and found myself involved with the military. It was not really a very logical position, but throughout the war I remained at heart a pacifist even though I must admit to sharing the collective sense of relief when war broke out in 1939. Tensions between Germany and the Allies built up in the period following Munich. Then after Chamberlain's announcement that Germany and Britain were 'in a state of war', there was a great spontaneous outpouring of feelings that had been bottled up for so long. People sang Land of Hope and Glory in the pubs; they cheered when they heard Churchill's speeches, particularly when there was a threat of invasion and he talked of 'blood,

sweat and tears.' He expressed the gut feelings of most people at the time.

These were emotions I understood and to some extent I felt myself; but they were short-lived when disaster followed disaster on the Continent and we had the 'phoney war' in Britain when nothing happened; and people became bored and longed for some action. My position was this – I longed for some sort of action, but it had to be concerned with healing and not killing. Although I experienced the collective catharsis, the sudden release of tension on the outbreak of war, I was aware that where it was all leading was more and more violence and the hardening of the heart. As Yeats wrote, 'Too much suffering makes a stone of the heart.'

We theorise about these things but the reality for me was that I and other pacifists, who saw service in the front line, felt degraded by war. But we were able to talk to our friends about our guilty feelings, fears and hopes, which made war for us a different kind of experience from the experience of the ordinary soldier, who was just thrown into it and simply obeyed orders. I didn't see the so-called enemy as any different, at least emotionally, from myself. He was also degraded by war. During the Blitz I was as pleased as anyone when British night fighters chased away the Luftwaffe from the sky over London; but I didn't see the

man in the cockpit as an enemy. He was as scared as I was. It was mainly a question of survival. We were all in it together – there were no victors or vanquished, just human beings at the mercy of power-seeking politicians and soldiers. The psychologist who understood this more than most was Alfred Adler who saw the main problem as 'the will to power.' In the sort of highly competitive world we have created everyone wants to excel at something; the politicians at persuading or compelling others to obey their will, soldiers at winning battles, which means killing and being killed.

My situation was less painful than the situation of so-called absolutists who were totally against war and would not lift a finger to help the war effort. Bertrand Russell was one of these in the First World War. He found that his greatest difficulty was the purely psychological one of resisting mass suggestion. This, as he pointed out, is almost impossible when the entire nation is in a state of hysteria. What kept him from going mad was his equally strong passion for intellectual sobriety. He describes how he translated concretes into abstracts, taking the emotion out of every situation. You find yourself doing this anyway, whether you're a pacifist or not. I had to cut myself off from all the suffering around me just in order to be able to do my job efficiently when looking after wounded and dying

soldiers. Strange how you harden your heart just in order to help people!

You are right when you say that being a humanist means putting mediation and discussion above power and dominance, but there shouldn't be too much talking. What we need most of all are alternative activities to war, such as regular social or humanitarian work performed jointly by young men and women of different cultures and races as an essential part of education. Instead of that, young people are being trained mostly for industry, to compete in the world's markets and to help them to make their own countries strong and economically powerful. This is what leads to war. Being human means the very opposite. Would it not be a good idea if humanistic psychologists became more actively involved in promoting lifestyles that, if they spread far and wide, would help to prevent wars from happening. If anyone would like to join me in studies of the psychology of living peacefully, I would be happy to hold weekly meetings in Winchester or perhaps the occasional weekend seminar.

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