For a Culture of Peace Pious Platitudes Won't do

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Peace is very much more than the absence of conflict and fighting.   It is a way of accepting one another based on a profound respect for one another, and an ability to reach out to others across every kind of difference.   This is the *culture* from which peace springs.   As you know, the General Assembly of United Nations used the world "culture" in its designation of the year 2000.   It spoke of a "*culture* of peace and non-violence".

This profound respect for others, and reaching out to them, doesn't require the down-playing of differences, or the fiction that differences don't matter, or the blurring of differences, or the need for all to be the same.   On the contrary, it presupposes that there are differences, and that they *do* matter, but that they don't have to disrupt human relationships.

However, - and this is the point I want to elaborate – conflict can be avoided only so long as there is an **underlying common ground** on which we can enter dialogue with one another, debate issues and work for consensus.   Tragically, it is this common ground that is at risk from an ideological virus that is already within kiwi culture and throughout the western world.

Culture is much more than song and dance and ethnic differences.   It properly refers to a people's most natural ways of thinking and choosing and relating to one another.   It is a people's ingrained way of doing things.   It is the mentality that is common to them as a group.

Unfortunately, any culture can be distorted by elements of ignorance, fear, prejudice and ideology, even unknowingly and in good faith.   That is why we need from time to time to re-examine our assumptions – the things we take for granted – and be willing to purify whatever is distorted.   None of us can claim immunity from this obligation to the truth – not even in the name of ethnic identity or culture or tradition or religion or agnosticism or academic qualifications.   Correcting false assumptions can require what the Christian scriptures, and other religions in their own ways, call a "change of heart", for, as Jesus put it, "it is from the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks".

That brings us to the nub of the problem: there would be no reason ever to change anything if truth were whatever the individual thinks it is, and if right were whatever the individual chooses.   These are the fatuous claims, promoted by some and parroted by others, that now permeate the culture of western liberal democracies.

These claims are also implied by those who misuse terms like tolerance, pluralism and impartiality to condone a kind of indifference to differences, and to opt out of responsibility for judging between true and false.   Such an abandonment of responsibility cannot be a secure basis on which to build peace.   Good relationships don't have to depend on avoiding the issues.

It is one thing to respect the person who holds views different from our own;   and to respect the right of every person to choose and to follow their own sincerely held convictions;   and

to shun deceit, manipulation and pressure as ways of influencing others.   Such respect for the dignity of every person is one thing;   it is quite another to say that every opinion is as valid as the next one;   and that individuals have a right to do whatever they please;   and that no one else can judge whether a particular way of behaving is right or wrong;   and that there is no way of ultimately knowing what is true or false anyway.   These glib claims amount to a massive denial that anything needs to change.   For why change anything (and for that matter why bother with any form of moral education) if truth is whatever the individual thinks it is, or if nobody really knows what it is, or if right is whatever the individual chooses, or if "nobody can judge" another's behaviour.   What we are dealing with here is the ideology and the cult of individualism.   Any creditable view of tolerance and pluralism and liberal democracy needs to disengage from the ideology of radical individualism.

I am not arguing for the imposition of any sectarian or denominational version of the truth.   I am arguing that if truth is ultimately only a matter of each individual's opinion, and if right is whatever the individual chooses, then the very possibility of dialogue, public debate and consensus is ruled out from the start.   The very grammar of dialogue and consensus-building is our shared obligation to seek the truth as something that isn't of the individual's own making.

Individualism affects our culture like a virus.   Personal rights are often defined without reference to social responsibilities.   Even those who piously talk of "balancing" rights with responsibilities are missing the point because rights and responsibilities aren't in any kind of opposition to each other.   Rights, properly understood, only exist for the purpose of enabling us to carry out our responsibilities.

Likewise, a concept of freedom that doesn't include an obligation to seek and follow truth is not freedom, and actually leads to freedom's own undoing.

The role of conscience used to be to measure one's conduct against norms that were not of our own making. Now, conscience is deemed to *decide* what shall be right and wrong;   and sometimes this means no more than mere personal preference.

Terms like "honesty" and "authenticity" used to indicate a commitment to certain ideals that one might fall short of.   Now they seem to imply dropping the commitment if one is struggling to live up to the ideal.   That is said to be "honest".

These aberrations are not harmless.   They diminish the potential of our lives, and they erode any culture of peace.

A good general education can teach us the need to accept one another and to accept the fact of differences in a pluralistic world.   Religious education can give us a reason for loving one another even when the other seems undeserving.   The human and social sciences can give us tools for enhancing understanding and resolving conflicts.   The law can draw the bottom lines of what is acceptable in our relationships with one another.   Political, social and economic policies can adjust our access to resources that belong ultimately to all.   But all these are undermined when there is a faulty understanding of what human life and human relations should be like.   It comes down to a sound anthropology.   No amount of fine-tuning of our education system, or of our political and economic policies, or of our laws, will make our lives more truly human if there is an underlying misunderstanding about **what it means to be human.**

Some of us will look to divine revelation to know what it means to be truly human because reason without faith can't know that human beings have a dignity and worth beyond their usefulness, whether to themselves or to others.   The consequences of not knowing this are huge.   But that is secularism.

Building a culture of peace depends on what we understand human persons and human life to be worth. And the greatest statement on that is the incarnation – the lengths God would go to for our sakes.   The deepest peace within ourselves, and between one another, comes

from knowing how much we mean to God.   That is the ultimate yardstick of our real value, and it turns out to be all good news.

It is in the light of divine revelation that we find the most decisive basis for respecting ourselves and respecting others, without which there can be no culture of peace.

This respect is not a passive thing;   it involves reaching out actively to promote the rights of others.   If we accommodate ourselves to living with the injustices that others suffer, we are indulging in the kind of peace that Christ "did not come to bring" when he spoke of bringing a sword instead.   The individualism I have described does not ultimately include concern for others in its understanding of self-fulfilment.   It is essentially a false anthropology.   To be made in the image of God means that we are persons only in relationship to other persons.   We cannot properly be *ourselves*, cannot be *authentically human*, if a right relationship with others is not our concern.   And a right relationship with others is what we mean by justice.   Building justice is essential to a culture of peace.

True justice doesn't set boundaries;   it is truly inclusive.   Pope John Paul II has called for human rights to be properly factored into international law, and for human rights violations to be no longer regarded as the merely "internal affairs" of sovereign states.

A culture of peace – the peace that springs from justice – does not let us feel helpless before   injustices that seem too big for us.   The reason why they are big is because ordinary people don't do all the little things we can do.   So if to mark the year 2000 we want to do something more for peace than we have been doing, let's start by throwing off the defeatist attitude that we are powerless.   And if you want to know what ordinary, little people like us can do, even about such things as dictatorships, the arms industry and the duplicitous policies of some Western governments, I suggest you read John Pilger's book *Secret Agendas* (Vintage, 1998).   You'll be shocked, ashamed and angry.   But let us at least be informed, and allow ourselves to experience sympathy with those who suffer.   Without genuine sympathy, a sense of identifying with them, our commitment to justice and to building peace simply won't last.

Finally, I said that deep respect for others and the active pursuit of justice are fundamental ingredients of a culture of peace.   Now let me say that they are not its source.   There is One who is "our peace and reconciliation" and who gives us his peace.   It is a gift, and it involves forgiveness.   We become the recipients of that gift, and the instruments of his peace, when we love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven.