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## SHOULD CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE REMEMBRANCE DAY?

A Our Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada's worship website (<worship.ca>) posted the following Essay of mine almost ten years ago now: Essay 132, October, 2008. I came across it again while searching for another item.

B But since the design and format of this website was altered a couple of years back, the complete inventory of my pre- 2013 Essays has not been available to new readers. So I'm taking the liberty of posting this Essay a second time, almost unchanged, in its new format, in the hope that the issues I raise will start a new conversation among Lutheran Christians and others.

C For far too long – seventeen hundred years! – the Mainline Christian Churches have been in bed with the Emperor. Christendom is dead. Let's celebrate that, and acknowledge that it is time to get out of the Emperor's bed. And re-open the propriety of this kind of dialogue!

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1 I moved to Canada from the USA in the Summer of 1982, but I took out Canadian citizenship only a few years ago. I now hold dual citizenship.

2 Canadians continue to puzzle me, however, with their observance of Remembrance Day, November 11. Americans call it Veterans Day, and don't make a very big thing of it. In the USA, you'll see a photo and a news item pertaining to our debt to our military, perhaps on an inside page. And that's it, at least as I recall.

3 But Canadians observe Remembrance Day with a stone-cold seriousness.

4 Aside: Can this be because Canada entered World War Two in 1939, as part of the Commonwealth, a full three years before America did in 1941? I sense a real anti-American bias in Canada, on precisely this issue. (If on no other — we're generally good neighbours and loyal friends.) Canadian losses in that conflict were indeed much greater than American losses, certainly in proportion to population. But perhaps something altogether other is at stake here, that I'm missing...

5 In any case, Canadian newspapers on that Day — and sometimes for several days before and after — feature whole sections devoted to stories and photos of aging veterans and their recollections and those of their loved ones. It's hard to escape the feeling that Remembrance Day is somehow dreadfully more significant to Canadians, as a civic ritual, than Veterans Day in USA.

6 How about as a religious ritual? That's the burden of these paragraphs. I'm asking here: Is it appropriate for Christians to celebrate Remembrance Day in Christian worship? And I'm concluding, maybe not. Would it be better to *acknowledge* the Day, in prayers and preaching, rather than to *celebrate* it? Here's my thinking on the subject.

7 First, it's worth recalling that early Christians were almost invariably pacifists, like today's Mennonites. An early (Fourth Century) Christian hero was Martin of Tours, a Roman legionnaire who according to legend gave up his military commission as the first Christian "conscientious objector". His Day, on many ecumenical calendars, including Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist, is November 11 — for our purposes here, a splendid convergence of date and themes indeed!

8 But also in the Fourth Century, Augustine suggested a way to allow Christians the option of following their leaders into war. His so-called "just war" theory presented five standards by which Christians may determine if the evil and waste caused by war is justifiable:

9 First, EXTREMITY: Is this war truly a last resort? Has every diplomatic effort been exhausted to avoid the evils of war, with its violence, destruction, displacement, and loss of life?...

10 Second, LEGALITY: Has this war been legally declared? To be justifiable, this war with its violence cannot be simply a vigilante action...

11 Third, WIN-ABILITY: Can this war actually be won? There is no justification for Christians' participating in simple suicidal violence. (Is there any other way to regard most of the world's regional conflicts today? Unremitting mutually destructive violence, with no prospect of decisive "victory" for either side?) Can it truthfully be said of any future war — anywhere — that it will actually be win-able?...

12 Fourth, PROPORTION: Is the evil of this war — the violence, destruction, displacement and loss of life that this war will cause — likely to be less than the evil this war is attempting to overthrow or to defeat? War, with its violence, destruction, displacement and loss of life, is always waste. Will the waste be worth it?...

13 Fifth and last: DISCRIMINATION: Can this war avoid involving civilians — especially the elderly, women and children — in the suffering, destruction, dislocations, and loss of life that war necessarily includes? Can the suffering of war be borne by military forces alone? So-called collateral casualties of war's violence are not acceptable, for this war to be considered justifiable...

14 As anyone can see from the above standards, modern warfare, with its indiscriminate aerial bombings, roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs), land mines, cluster bombs, and suicide missions is simply too horrible to be any longer justifiable. I write as a Christian addressing other Christians.

15 Further, it is reasonable to expect that any and all future wars will unleash the same or similar diabolical arsenals, with the same unspeakable horrors as consequence.

16 So I pose a series of questions for Christians to consider.

17 My first question is CULTURAL: Is it time for the Christian Churches to take a stronger stand against the culture of violence that surrounds us? I continue to be appalled at the violence in movies, on TV, in video games, and often explicitly in our sports. That violence is as old as the *Three Stooges* in cinema and *Popeye* in the comics. But I'm not certain any of it is any longer justifiable.

18 And I haven't begun to consider here the violence caused by American gun-worship! If I could wave a magic wand, I'd repeal the Second Amendment to the US Constitution!

19 My wife, a Family Life educator, would even question the propriety of parents spanking their own children. Does spanking kids teach them that if you're bigger — a grown up — then violence is OK?

20 Second — and here I am striking closer to home — a THEOLOGICAL question: Can the Churches any longer afford to endorse the so-called Anselmic Theory of the Atonement? That's the explanation you learned in Sunday School about human sin needing a sacrifice to appease a righteous God. Jesus' agonizing death is interpreted in this view as somehow a substitute for the death of all of us sinners, a sacrifice demanded by a Holy God, who in mercy offers up his own Son instead, in our place.

21 That sounds to me more like child abuse than Good News. The God who would require that is a monster, I have come to believe.

22 Yes, the outlines of this interpretation can be found in the Bible itself. I'd be willing to challenge the Scriptures on this point, as on others, and still maintain the Bible is authoritative for me.

23 The idea of "redemptive violence" has long ago passed its usefulness. It was a mistake in Anselm's day (Twelfth Century); It is not helpful in the Bible. And it is downright disastrous in the Twenty First Century. Can't Churches today speak of Jesus' suffering simply as the consequence of steadfast love confronting evil, and leave it at that?

24 Third, and closer to the burden of my title, a question of SOCIAL JUSTICE: Is Canadian civic observance of Remembrance Day counter-productive to the cause of peace? To honour our fallen warriors by glorifying their sacrifice — this strikes me as precisely the wrong kind of remembrance they'd want. Or the world needs, at this time in our history.

25 Certainly Christians can legitimately honour courage and self-giving, wherever we find it, even in presumed enemies. But should we not also pity our warriors — all warriors — and grieve with them, grieve for them? That they should serve as surrogates for us in a savage, brutish work they had no part in starting? Or that they — and we — were so deceived by our leaders as to squander entirely the precious sacrifice of these our children — their lives, their limbs, their youth, their mental and emotional wholeness? Is not that the kind of remembrance they deserve?

- 26 Isn't it time to use these words, to call it what it is? War is waste. Medieval barbarism, accomplishing nothing.
- 27 When will we learn that lesson? And from whom? Not from our politicians. And not, alas, from our civic rituals on Remembrance Day.
- 28 Maybe, just maybe — Dare I propose it? — from the Churches?
- 29 Is it time for all Christians to follow the lead of Mennonites and Quakers and refuse henceforth to fight in any war?
- 30 This brings me to my fourth question, ECCLESIAL and LITURGICAL, and it has to do with the very nature of the Christian Church and its worship life. Are Churches acquiescing to the appropriateness of violence — sanctifying violence — when they celebrate Remembrance Day? Within a Sunday Eucharist or Morning Prayer? In a separate religious or civic exercise apart from a Church building?
- 31 Do Remembrance Day observances within a service of Christian worship send a mixed message, in any Church professing devotion to Christ's shalom? Or is there a way to observe Remembrance Day in our Churches that will nevertheless avoid sacralizing violence?
- 32 I do not have authoritative answers to any of these questions. But I'm leaning toward the possibility of refusing to wear my poppy next month simply as a private personal protest.
- 33 And I'm leaving unaddressed here a host of ancillary questions. What would be a legitimate way for Christians to observe civic exercises on Remembrance Day? What's the propriety of military chaplaincies? Can we legitimately differentiate between peace keeping efforts that require a military presence, and outright war? Is there a distinction to be drawn between a philosophical pacifism, such as that of the Quakers and Mennonites, and what might be called a situational pacifism based on Augustine — definitely a more Lutheran approach? And if so, what's the proper role for the Christian churches if they adopt a kind of situational pacifism?
- 34 Well, all this is simply to stir the pot. I welcome response.

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