

handbook, *The Courtier*. It was also adopted by James I, whose first speech to Parliament could have been written by Erasmus himself. James sought to establish a culture of pacifism in England – his own personal motto was *Beati Pacifici*, ‘Blessed are the Peacemakers’, and this is reflected in the later writings of Shakespeare and Bacon.

In his plays of the early 1590s Shakespeare seems to take the side of militarism, and there is even an apparent glorification of violence in *Titus Andronicus*. By the time of *Henry V*, in 1599, however, militarism is being questioned, and as Shapiro suggests in his book *1599*, “Shakespeare fills the play with competing, critical voices”, while in *Troilus and Cressida* (1602-3) there is a sustained attack on classical war heroes and arguments for war. By the time of the great tragedies, military power is presented as a deficiency of power over oneself. Othello, Macbeth, Antony and Coriolanus are all great generals whose martial virtues are shown to be tragically flawed. In the late romances Shakespeare moves from anti-militarist critiques to affirmations of the state of peace. As Prospero puts it in *The Tempest*, “With my nobler reason against my fury, do I take part; the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance”.



Francis Bacon

Bacon, like Shakespeare, was a humanist. In the Latin version of his *Advancement of Learning*, published in 1623, the same year as the First Folio, he wrote of himself that he was ‘but a trumpeter, not a combatant’, and he continued: “Nor is mine a trumpet which summons and excites men to cut each other to pieces...but rather to make peace be-

tween themselves and, turning with united forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire, as far as God Almighty in his goodness may permit”.

Despite the efforts of James I, Shakespeare and Bacon, the 17th century was notable for wars of religion. But the ideas of Renaissance humanists did not go away. They believed that through reason and knowledge the human race can develop its better nature and guard against the barbarism which lies below the surface. All humanists since then have shared this basic belief.

The 19th Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau thought that humanity could be cured of its ills if it developed the arts and sciences and made them accessible to everyone. Voltaire was a passionate pacifist, though not entirely a consistent one. Both he and Rousseau believed that wars happened not so much for lack of international peacekeeping structures but because they were a way of life among a militarised, aristocratic ruling class. Kant, although not a total pacifist, wrote in *Perpetual Peace* (1795): “The general and continuous establishment of peace constitutes not only a part, but the entire end and purpose of a theory of rights within the limits of pure reason”. In the *Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine argued that the answer to war lay in free trade, and of course republican government.

I am conscious of the pressure of time, so no I shall make a gigantic leap to the 20th century and to secular humanists like Einstein and Bertrand Russell. Albert Einstein had two public passions. One was his work: he was a dedicated and groundbreaking scientist. The other was peace, to which he was committed all his life.

Following World War II, Einstein was a leading figure in the World Government Movement and continued to work for peace and world order, campaigning for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. When asked what kind of weapons World War III would be fought with, Einstein famously responded: “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones”.

Bertrand Russell was also particularly concerned at the suffering caused by war, and campaigned against the First World

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War. His opposition led him to be sent to prison for six months. However, during the Second World War (1939-45) he renounced pacifism. When nuclear weapons were developed he became one of the earliest supporters of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. When he was a frail, white-haired old man of eighty-nine, he led a mass sit-in in Trafalgar Square for which he received another prison sentence.

In 1955 these two men agreed to issue the Russell-Einstein Manifesto, in which Russell wrote: “There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge and wisdom. Shall we instead choose death because we cannot forget our quarrels? Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new paradise; if you cannot, nothing lies before you but universal death.”

Clearly, from what has been said, pacifism is a recurrent theme in the Humanist tradition. Many freethinkers, humanists and sceptics have taken the view that violence is such an evil and our ability to control it and justify it is so limited that we must err on the side of peace. Respect for life is a fundamental Humanist principle, for Humanism is nothing if it is not first and foremost a philosophy of humanness. This is what Bertrand Russell meant when he pleaded: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest”. Apart from very exceptional circumstances it is therefore wrong to kill human beings, irrespective of their race, religion, class or nationality.

Of course, everything hinges on these ‘exceptional circumstances’. Is violence justified in self-defence or to protect the innocent? Is it justified by some ‘higher purpose’, such as securing freedom and justice? During our ‘Troubles’ Republican paramilitaries claimed to be defending the Catholic population from both state and Loyalist terrorism, while Loyalist paramilitaries argued they were defending the people from the IRA. ➤