



# The Problem of Peace

*Nobel Lecture November 4, 1954*

*Dr Albert Schweitzer*

*In his native Kaysersberg in Alsace there is a statue of Albert Schweitzer with the simple inscription: Prix Nobel de la Paix, summing up the humanitarian ideals by which he lived his life and that are reflected in his lecture below, delivered sixty years ago. In the light of recent events, his ethical message is as relevant as ever, as is his contention of the continuing inhumanity of war with even more sophisticated weapons than he mentions. It is also worth noting that Schweitzer was speaking before the creation of the EU, itself conceived as a means of bringing Europe together. Next year is the 50th anniversary of Schweitzer's death and we are planning a one-day conference on his life and work. As I write this I am listening to his 1950 recording of Bach's organ fugue in A minor.*

For the subject of my lecture, a redoubtable honour imposed by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, I have chosen the problem of peace as it is today. In so doing, I believe that I have acted in the spirit of the founder of this prize who devoted himself to the study of the problem as it existed in his own day and age, and who expected his Foundation to encourage consideration of ways to serve the cause of peace.

I shall begin with an account of the situation at the end of the two wars through which we have recently passed.

The statesmen who were responsible for shaping the world of today through the negotiations that followed each of these two wars found the cards stacked against them. Their aim was not so much to create situations that might give rise to widespread and prosperous development as it was to establish the results of victory on a permanent basis. Even if their judgment had been unerring, they could not have used it as a guide. They were obliged to regard themselves as the executors of the will of the conquering peoples. They could not aspire to establishing relations between peoples on a just and proper basis; all their efforts were taken up by the necessity of preventing the most unreasonable of the demands made by the victors from becoming reality; they had, moreover, to convince the conquering nations to compromise with each other whenever their respective views and interests conflicted.

The true source of what is untenable in our present situation - and the victors are beginning to suffer from it as well as the vanquished - lies in the fact that not enough thought was given to the realities of historical fact and, consequently, to what is just and beneficial.

## Historical Background

The historical problem of Europe is conditioned by the fact that in past centuries, particularly in the so-called era of the great invasions, the peoples from the East penetrated farther and farther into the West and Southwest, taking possession of the land <sup>1</sup>. So it came about that the later immigrants intermingled with the earlier already established immigrants.

A partial fusion of these peoples took place during this time, and new relatively homogeneous political societies were formed within the new frontiers. In western and central Europe, this evolution led to a situation that may be said to have crystallized and become definitive in its main features in the course of the nineteenth century.

In the East and Southeast, on the other hand, the evolution did not reach this stage; it stopped with the coexistence of nationalities which failed to merge. Each could lay some claim to rightful ownership of the land. One might claim territorial rights by virtue of longer possession or superiority of numbers, while another might point to its contribution in developing the land. The only practical solution would have been for the two groups to agree to live together in the same territory and in a single political society, in accordance with a compromise acceptable to both. It would have been necessary, however, for this state of affairs to have been reached before the second third of the nineteenth century. For, from then on, there was increasingly vigorous development of national consciousness which brought with it serious consequences. This development no longer allowed peoples to be guided by historical realities and by reason.

The First World War, then, had its origins in the conditions prevailing in eastern and southeastern Europe. The new order created after both world wars bears in its turn the seeds of a future conflict.

Any new postwar structure is bound to contain the seeds of conflict unless it takes account of historical fact and is designed to provide a just and objective solution to problems in the light of that fact. Only such a solution can be really permanent.

Historical reality is trampled underfoot if, when two peoples have rival historical claims to the same country, the claims of only one are recognised. The titles which two nations hold to disputed parts of Europe never have more than a relative value since the peoples of both are, in effect, immigrants.

Similarly, we are guilty of contempt for history if, in establishing a new order, we fail to take economic realities into consideration. Such is the case if we draw a boundary so as to deprive a part of its natural hinterland or raise a barrier between a region rich in raw materials and another particularly suited to exploiting them. By such measures do we create states which cannot survive economically.

The most flagrant violation of historical rights, and indeed of human rights, consists in depriving certain peoples of their right to the land on which they live, thus forcing them to move to other territories. At the end of the Second World War, the victorious powers decided to impose this fate on hundreds of thousands of people, and under the harshest conditions <sup>2</sup>; from this we can judge how little aware they were of any mission to work toward a reorganisation which would be reasonably equitable and which would guarantee a prosperous future.

Our situation ever since the Second World War has been characterised essentially by the fact that no peace treaty has yet been signed<sup>3</sup>. It was only through agreements of a truce-like nature that the war came to an end; and it is indeed because of our inability to effect a reorganisation, however elemental, that we are obliged to be content with these truces which, dictated by the needs of the moment, can have no foreseeable future.

### The Problem of War and Peace Now

This then is the present situation. How do we perceive the problem of peace now?

In quite a new light - different to the same extent that modern war is different from war in the past. War now employs weapons of death and destruction incomparably more effective than those of the past and is consequently a worse evil than ever before. Heretofore war could be regarded as an evil to which men must resign themselves because it served progress and was even necessary to it. One could argue that thanks to war the peoples with the strongest virtues survived; thus determining the course of history.

It could be claimed, for example, that the victory of Cyrus over the Babylonians created an empire in the Near East with a civilisation higher than that which it supplanted, and that Alexander the Great's victory in its turn opened the way, from the Nile to the Indus, for Greek civilization. The reverse, however, sometimes occurred when war led to the replacement of a superior civilisation by an inferior one, as it did, for instance, in the seventh century and at the beginning of the eighth when the Arabs gained mastery over Persia, Asia Minor, Palestine, North Africa, and Spain, countries that had hitherto flourished under a Greco-Roman civilisation.

It would seem then that, in the past, war could operate just as well in favour of progress as against it. It is with much less conviction that we can claim modern war to be an agent of progress. The evil that it embodies weighs more heavily on us than ever before.

It is worth remembering that the generation preceding 1914 approved the enormous stockpiling of armaments. The argument was that a military decision would be reached with rapidity and that very brief wars could be expected. This opinion was taken for granted.

Because they anticipated the progressive humanisation of the methods of war, people also believed that the evils resulting from future conflicts would be relatively slight. This supposition grew out of the obligations accepted by nations under the terms of the Geneva Convention of 1864, following the efforts of the Red Cross. Mutual guarantees were exchanged concerning care for the wounded, the humane treatment of prisoners of war, and the welfare of the civilian population. This convention did indeed achieve some significant results for which hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians were to be thankful in the wars to come. But, compared to the miseries of war, which have grown beyond all proportion with the introduction of modern weapons of death and destruction, they are trivial indeed. Truly, it cannot be any question of 'humanising' war.

The concept of the brief war and that of the humanisation of its methods, propounded as they were on the eve of war in 1914, led people to take the war less seriously than they should have. They regarded it as a storm which was to clear the political air and as an event which was to end the arms race that was ruining every nation in Europe.

While some lightheartedly supported the war on account of the profits they expected to gain from it, others did so from a more noble motive: this war must be the war to end all wars. Many a brave man set out for battle in the belief that he was fighting for a day when war would no longer exist.

In this conflict, just as in that of 1939, these two concepts proved to be completely wrong. Slaughter and destruction continued year after year and were carried on in the most

inhumane way. In contrast to the war of 1870<sup>4</sup> the duel was not between two isolated nations, but between two great groups of nations, so that a large share of mankind became embroiled, thus compounding the tragedy.

Since we now know what a terrible evil war is, we must spare no effort to prevent its recurrence. To this reason must also be added an ethical one: in the course of the last two wars, we have been guilty of acts of inhumanity which make one shudder, and in any future war we would certainly be guilty of even worse. This must not happen!

### The Inhuman Superman

Let us dare to face the situation. Man has become superman. He is a superman because he not only has at his disposal innate physical forces, but also commands, thanks to scientific and technological advances, the latent forces of nature, which he can now put to his own use. To kill at a distance, man used to rely solely on his own physical strength; he used it to bend the bow and to release the arrow. The superman has progressed to the stage where, thanks to a device designed for the purpose, he can use the energy released by the combustion of a given combination of chemical products. This enables him to employ a much more effective projectile and to propel it over far greater distances.

However, the superman suffers from a fatal flaw. He has failed to rise to the level of superhuman reason which to match that of his superhuman strength. He requires such reason to put this vast power to solely reasonable and useful ends and not to destructive and murderous ones. Because he lacks it, the conquests of science and technology become a mortal danger to him rather than a blessing.

In this context is it not significant that the first great scientific discovery, the harnessing of the force resulting from the combustion of gunpowder, was seen at first only as a means of killing at a distance?

The conquest of the air, thanks to the internal-combustion engine, marked a decisive advance for humanity. Yet men grasped at once the opportunity it offered to kill and destroy from the skies. This invention underlined a fact that had hitherto been steadfastly denied: the more the superman gains in strength, the poorer he becomes. To avoid exposing himself completely to the destruction unleashed from the skies, he is obliged to seek refuge underground like a hunted animal. At the same time he must resign himself to abetting the unprecedented destruction of cultural values.

A new stage was reached with the discovery and subsequent deployment of the vast forces liberated by the splitting of the atom. After a time, it was found that the destructive potential of such a bomb was incalculable, and that even large-scale tests could unleash catastrophes threatening the very existence of the human race. Only now has the full horror of our position become obvious. No longer can we evade the question of the future of mankind.

But the essential fact which we should acknowledge in our conscience, and which we should have acknowledged a long time ago, is that we are becoming inhuman to the extent that we become supermen. We have learned to tolerate the facts of war: that men are killed en masse - some twenty million in the Second World War - that whole cities and their inhabitants are annihilated by the atomic bomb, that men are turned into living torches by incendiary bombs. We learn of these things from the radio or newspapers and we judge them according to whether they signify success for the group of peoples to which we belong, or for our enemies. When we do admit to ourselves that such acts are the results of inhuman conduct, our admission is accompanied by the thought that the very fact of war itself leaves us no option but to accept them. *In resigning ourselves to our fate without a struggle, we are guilty of inhumanity.*



## Ethics and Law in the Establishment of Peace

What really matters is that we should all of us realise that we are guilty of inhumanity. The horror of this realisation should shake us out of our lethargy so that we can direct our hopes and our intentions to the coming of an era in which war will have no place.

These hopes and and these determinations can have but one aim: to attain, through a change in spirit, that state of superior reason that will dissuade us from misusing the power at our disposal.

The first to have the courage to advance purely ethical arguments against war and to stress the necessity for reason governed by an ethical will was the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam in his *Querela Pacis (The Complaint of Peace)* which appeared in 1517 <sup>5</sup>. In this book he depicts Peace on stage seeking an audience.

Erasmus found few successors to his way of thinking. The idea that peace might be brought nearer by the affirmation of an ethical necessity was dismissed as a utopian ideal. Kant shared this opinion. In his essay on "Perpetual Peace", which appeared in 1795 <sup>6</sup>, and in other publications in which he touches upon the problem of peace, he states his belief that peace will come only with the increasing authority of an international code of law, in accordance with which an

international court of arbitration would settle disputes between nations. This authority, he maintains, should be based entirely on the increasing respect which, in time, and for purely practical motives, men will hold for the law as such. Kant is unremitting in his insistence that the idea of a league of nations cannot be hoped for as the outcome of ethical argument, but only as the result of the perfecting of law. He believes that this process of perfecting will come of itself. In his opinion, "nature, that great artist" will lead men, very gradually, it is true, and over a very long period of time, through the march of history and the misery of wars, to agree on an international code of law which will guarantee perpetual peace.

A plan for a league of nations having powers of arbitration was first formulated with some precision by Sully, the friend and minister of Henry IV. It was given detailed treatment by the Abbé Castel de Saint-Pierre in three works, the most important of which bears the title *Projet de paix perpétuelle entre les souverains chrétiens* [Plan for Perpetual Peace between Christian Sovereigns]. Kant was aware of the views it developed, probably from an extract that Rousseau published in 1761 <sup>7</sup>.

Today we can judge the efficacy of international institutions by the experience we have had with the League of Nations in Geneva and with the United Nations. Such institutions can render important services by offering to mediate conflicts



at their very inception, by taking the initiative in setting up international projects, and by other actions of a similar nature, depending on the circumstances. One of the League of Nations' most important achievements was the creation in 1922 of an internationally valid passport for the benefit of those who became stateless as a consequence of war<sup>8</sup>. What a position those people would have been in if this travel document had not been devised through Nansen's initiative! What would have been the fate of displaced persons after 1945 if the United Nations had not existed!

### The Need for the Ethical Spirit

Nevertheless these two institutions have been unable to bring about peace. Their efforts were doomed to fail since they were obliged to undertake them in a world in which there was no prevailing spirit directed toward peace. And being only legal institutions, they were unable to create such a spirit. The ethical spirit alone has the power to generate it. Kant deceived himself in thinking that he could dispense with it in his search for peace. We must follow the road on which he turned his back.

What is more, we just cannot wait the extremely long time he deemed necessary for this movement toward peace to mature. War today means annihilation, a fact that Kant did not foresee. Decisive steps must be taken to ensure peace, and decisive results obtained without delay. Only through the spirit can all this be done.

Is the spirit capable of achieving what we in our distress must expect of it?

Let us not underestimate its power, the evidence of which can be seen throughout the history of mankind. The spirit created this humanitarianism that is the origin of all progress toward some form of higher existence. Inspired by humanitarianism we are true to ourselves and capable of creating. Inspired by a contrary spirit we are unfaithful to ourselves and fall prey to all manner of error.

The height to which the spirit can ascend was revealed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It led those peoples of Europe who possessed it out of the Middle Ages, putting an end to superstition, witch hunts, torture, and a multitude of other forms of cruelty or traditional folly. It replaced the old with the new in an evolutionary way that never ceases to astonish those who observe it. All that we have ever possessed of true civilisation, and indeed all that we still possess, can be traced to a manifestation of this spirit.

Later, its power waned because the spirit failed to find support for its ethical character in a world preoccupied with scientific pursuits. It has been replaced by a spirit less sure of the course humanity should take and more content with lesser ideals. Today if we are to avoid our own downfall, we must commit ourselves to this spirit once again. It must bring forth a new miracle just as it did in the Middle Ages, an even greater miracle than the first.

The spirit is not dead; it lives in isolation. It has overcome the difficulty of having to exist in a world out of harmony with its ethical character. It has come to realise that it can find no home other than in the basic nature of man. The independence acquired through its acceptance of this realisation is an additional asset.

It is convinced that compassion, in which ethics takes root, does not assume its true proportions until it embraces not only man but every living being. To the old ethics, which lacked this depth and force of conviction, has been added the ethics of reverence for life, and its validity is steadily gaining in recognition.

Once more we dare to appeal to the whole man, to his capacity to think and feel, exhorting him to know himself and to be true to himself. We reaffirm our trust in the profound qualities of his nature. And our living experiences are proving us right.

In 1950, there appeared a book entitled *Témoignages d'Humanité [Documents of Humanity]*<sup>9</sup>, published by some

professors from the University of Göttingen who had been brought together by the frightful mass expulsion of the eastern Germans in 1945. The refugees tell in simple words of the help they received in their distress from men belonging to the enemy nations, men who might well have been moved to hate them. Rarely have I been so gripped by a book as I was by this one. It is a wonderful tonic for anyone who has lost faith in humanity.

Whether peace comes or not depends on the direction in which the mentality of individuals develops and then, in turn, on that of their nations. This truth holds more meaning for us today than it did for the past. Erasmus, Sully, the Abbé Castel de Saint-Pierre, and the others who in their time were engrossed in the problem of peace dealt with princes and not with peoples. Their efforts tended to be concentrated on the establishment of a supranational authority vested with the power of arbitrating any difficulties that might arise between princes. Kant, in his essay on "Perpetual Peace", was the first to foresee an age when peoples would govern themselves and when they, no less than the sovereigns, would be concerned with the problem of peace. He thought of this evolution as progress. In his opinion, peoples would be more inclined than princes to maintain peace because it is they who bear the miseries of war.

The time has come, certainly, when governments must look on themselves as the executors of the will of the people. But Kant's reliance on the people's innate love for peace has not been justified. Because the will of the people, being the will of the crowd, has not avoided the danger of instability and the risk of emotional distraction from the path of true reason, it has failed to demonstrate a vital sense of responsibility. Nationalism of the worst sort was displayed in the last two wars, and it may be regarded today as the greatest obstacle to mutual understanding between peoples.

Such nationalism can be repulsed only through the rebirth of a humanitarian ideal among men which will make their allegiance to their country a natural one inspired by genuine ideals.

Spurious nationalism is rampant in countries across the seas too, especially among those peoples who formerly lived under white domination and who have recently gained their independence. They are in danger of allowing nationalism to become their one and only ideal. Indeed, peace, which had prevailed until now in many areas, is today in jeopardy.

These peoples, too, can overcome their naive nationalism only by adopting a humanitarian ideal. But how is such a change to be brought about? Only when the spirit becomes a living force within us and leads us to a civilisation based on the humanitarian ideal, will it act, through us, upon these peoples. All men are, as beings capable of compassion, able to develop a humanitarian spirit. It abides within them like tinder ready to be lit, waiting only for a spark.

The idea that the reign of peace must come one day has been given expression by a number of peoples who have attained a certain level of civilisation. In Palestine it appeared for the first time in the words of the prophet Amos in the eighth century B.C.<sup>10</sup>, and it continues to live in the Jewish and Christian religions as the belief in the Kingdom of God. It figures in the doctrine taught by the great Chinese thinkers: Confucius and Lao-tse in the sixth century B.C., Mi-tse in the fifth, and Meng-tse in the fourth<sup>11</sup>. It reappears in Tolstoy<sup>12</sup> and in other contemporary European thinkers. People have labeled it a utopia. But the situation today is such that it must become reality in one way or another; otherwise mankind will perish.

I am well aware that what I have had to say on the problem of peace is not essentially new. It is my profound conviction that the solution lies in our rejecting war for an ethical reason; namely, that war makes us guilty of the crime of inhumanity. Erasmus of Rotterdam and several others after him have already proclaimed this as the truth around which we should rally.

The only originality I claim is that for me this truth goes hand in hand with the intellectual certainty that the human spirit



is capable of creating in our time a new mentality, an ethical mentality. Inspired by this certainty, I too proclaim this truth in the hope that my testimony may help to prevent its rejection as an admirable sentiment but a practical impossibility. Many a truth has lain unnoticed for a long time, ignored simply because no one perceived its potential for becoming reality.

*Only when an ideal of peace is born in the minds of the peoples will the institutions set up to maintain this peace effectively fulfil the function expected of them.*

Even today, we live in an age characterised by the absence of peace; even today, nations can feel themselves threatened by other nations; even today, we must concede to each nation the right to stand ready to defend itself with the terrible weapons now at its disposal.

Such is the predicament in which we seek the first sign of the spirit in which we must place our trust. This sign can be none other than an effort on the part of peoples to atone as far as possible for the wrongs they inflicted upon each other during the last war. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners and deportees are waiting to return to their homes; others, unjustly condemned by a foreign power, await their acquittal; innumerable other injustices still await reparation.

In the name of all who toil in the cause of peace, I beg the peoples to take the first step along this new highway. Not one of them will lose a fraction of the power necessary for their own defense.

If we take this step to liquidate the injustices of the war that we have just experienced, we will instill a little confidence in all people. For any enterprise, confidence is the capital without which no effective work can be carried on. It creates in every sphere of activity conditions favouring fruitful growth. In such an atmosphere of confidence thus created we can begin to seek an equitable settlement of the problems caused by the two wars.

I believe that I have expressed the thoughts and hopes of millions of men who, in our part of the world, live in fear of war to come. May my words convey their intended meaning if they penetrate to the other part of the world - the other side of the trench - to those who live there in the same fear.

May the men who hold the destiny of peoples in their hands, studiously avoid anything that might cause the present situation to deteriorate and become even more dangerous. May they take to heart the words of the Apostle Paul: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men".<sup>13</sup> These words are valid not only for individuals, but for nations as well. May these nations, in their efforts to maintain peace, do their utmost to give the spirit time to grow and to act.

*Dr. Schweitzer delivered this lecture in the Auditorium of Oslo University almost a year after having received the award. The Oslo Aftenposten for November 5 reports that he read quietly from a manuscript and that the seriousness and simplicity of his speech moved the audience. This translation is based on the text in French, the language which Dr. Schweitzer used on this occasion, published in Les Prix Nobel en 1954.*

- 1 The Huns moved into the Danube valley in the fourth century; the Visigoths moved westward into Italy and Spain early in the fifth century; the Vandals moved into France and Spain somewhat later in the century.
  - 2 The major example: The Potsdam Conference (1945), attended by the principal World War II Allies, allowed the mass expulsion of the German population from Czechoslovakia and from the territories given over to Russian and Polish administration.
  - 3 Nor has a peace treaty with Germany been signed as of August, 1971.
  - 4 France versus Germany.
  - 5 Desiderius Erasmus (1466?-1536), *Querela pacis undique gentium ejectae profligataeque* (Basel: Joh.Froben, 1517).
  - 6 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795). English translation entitled *Perpetual Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); the introduction is by **Nicholas Murray Butler**, Nobel Peace co-laureate for 1931.
  - 7 Maximilien de Béthune, duc de Sully (1560-1641), in scattered passages of his memoirs, *Oeconomies royales* (1638), describes a "Grand Design" for world organization which he attributes to Henry IV. Abbé Castel de Saint-Pierre (1658-1743), *Projet de paix perpétuelle* (1712, 1717); *Discours sur la polysynodie* (1719). Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), *Extrait du Projet de paix perpétuelle de M. l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre* (Amsterdam, 1761). Two other such pieces by Rousseau, on *Polysynodie* and his *Jugement sur la Paix perpétuelle*, were written in 1756 but published for the first time in the posthumous editions of his works.
  - 8 The "Nansen Passport" (so called for Fridtjof Nansen, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for 1922) was an identification certificate, established in July, 1922, for Armenian, Chaldean, Turkish, and Syrian refugees, which could be used as a passport.
  - 9 *Documents of Humanity during the Mass Expulsions*, compiled by K.O. Kurth, translated by Helen Taubert and Margaret Brooke (Göttingen: Göttingen Research Committee, 1952).
  - 10 Amos 9:11-15.
  - 11 Confucius (551-479 B.C.); Lao-tse (600-517 B.C.); Mitse [also Mo Ti or Micius] (479-372 B.C.); Meng-tse [also Mencius] (371-289 B.C.).
  - 12 In the Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), Volume 20 is entitled *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*. See, for example, "Address to the Swedish Peace Congress in 1909", pp. 583-591.
  - 13 Romans 12:18.
- From **Nobel Lectures, Peace 1951-1970**, Editor Frederick W. Haberman, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1972  
Copyright © The Nobel Foundation 1952  
"Albert Schweitzer - Nobel Lecture: The Problem of Peace". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 14 Dec 2014. <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1952/schweitzer-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1952/schweitzer-lecture.html)>  
Copyright © Nobel Media AB 2014



## THE LAW OF LOVE – LEO TOLSTOY

The longer I live — especially now when I clearly feel the approach of death — the more I feel moved to express what I feel more strongly than anything else, and what in my opinion is of immense importance, namely, what we call the renunciation of all opposition by force, which really simply means the doctrine of the law of love unperverted by sophistries. Love, or in other words the striving of men's souls towards unity and the submissive behaviour to one another that results therefrom, represents the highest and indeed the only law of life, as every man knows and feels in the depths of his heart (and as we see most clearly in children), and knows until he becomes involved in the lying net of worldly thoughts... Any employment of force is incompatible with love.