2 The Historical Frame

PREAMBLE

Many themes – in idealism, commitment to human welfare, and practical politics – were to contribute to the emergence of the United Nations. Principal among these was the age-old longing for a just world that would live in peace, a secure *pax orbis* that would encourage the gradual improvement of the human condition. Isaiah (2, 4) imagined swords beaten into plowshares, and nations that no longer warred with their neighbours; Jesus (Matthew 5, 9) blessed the peacemakers as ‘the children of God’ (though, with nice paradox, at times preferred the sword to peace*). In tribute to the dream, both secular and spiritual leaders were dubbed ‘Prince of Peace’, though often content to secure tranquillity by the destruction of their enemies. Echoing Isaiah, the celebrated Dr Montague John Rendall (1862–1950), one of the first Governors of the British Broadcasting Corporation, in 1927 composed the motto of the Corporation: ‘Nation shall speak peace unto nation.’

It is obvious that the ubiquitous yearning for peace has co-existed throughout all human history with military invasions, the destruction of people and property, all the horrors of conquest and genocide. The struggle for peace has endured through aeons of gloom and disillusion, the beacon of hope kept alive in each new generation. Philip J. Noel-Baker, winner of the Nobel Prize for peace in 1959, considered the award ‘the greatest honor a man can receive in this world’ (a judgement he may have been prepared to modify in the light of the similar honouring of Henry Kissinger, a man most remarkable for his subversion of Chilean democracy and his massive bombing of Cambodia). In any event, no-one doubted that peace had to be worked for, hopefully protected in protocols and legislation, and enshrined in the charters of institutions. A principal aim of the United Nations was ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’ (the first declaration in the preamble to the Charter).

The dream was unambiguous, but it was seldom clear how it could be attained. In the classical Vegetius, in the introduction to *Epitoma Rei*

*See Matthew 10, 34; Luke 22, 36.*

G. Simons, *UN Malaise*
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The Background

*Militaris*, we find the exhortation *qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum* (he who desires peace must prepare for war), a notion that has echoed down through the ages and always served as justification for the profligate allocation of treasure for the production of arms. Others have suggested that if we want peace we should prepare for peace; that we should work to remove the social and political conditions that encourage war; that we should be honest in admitting the relevance of vast disparities in wealth, of the ambitions of elites, of the interests of large corporations and the nation state. The United Nations will learn to focus on such matters in its quest for global peace.

THE HYBRID HERITAGE

One of the main animating themes behind the spirit of the United Nations (and the letter of the Charter) is the idea that humanity can live in a harmonious world as one family, where all people acknowledge common interests and are subject to the rule of law. There have always been thoughts about how humankind could become united, and not all such ideas were pacific: many rulers have envisaged how military conquest could generate a single world state, and religious totalitarians have been happy to contemplate a congenial global bigotry that would facilitate the speedy extermination of heretics. It is not enough that some authority achieve global sway: the essential consideration of human rights must inform any framing of an international or global constitution. Erasmus (1466–1536), the great Dutch satirist and humanist, considered ‘kingdoms of moderate power united in a Christian league’, suggesting with such a concept the notion that monarchical ambition would need to be limited in the interest of a wider union. Others envisaged a secular rather than a religious focus.

Thus in the *Memoirs* of Maximilien de Bédhune, Duc de Sully (1560–1641), we encounter a ‘grand design’ for a Universal Christian Commonwealth of Europe, which, despite the nod to religion, is essentially a secular and radical programme to bring peace and harmony to what he perceived to be the important nation states of the day. In the same spirit the Dutch jurist and theologian Hugo Grotius, or Huig de Groot (1583–1645), in *De Jure Belli et Pacis* (On the Law of War and Peace) suggested a basis for international law. In 1618 political and religious strife led to his imprisonment, but he escaped to Paris where Louis XIII awarded him a pension. The work of Bédhune and Grotius was to influence the framing of the Covenant of the League of Nations nearly three centuries later.