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“REMEMBRANCE AND RECONCILIATION: PUBLIC SPACES, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MUNICIPAL PEACE IDENTITY IN COVENTRY, U.K”

ABSTRACT

The bombing of Coventry in World War II has shaped the collective memory of the city and led to subsequent efforts at reconciliation, beginning with initiatives from its Cathedral and expanding to projects and programmes established by the city council and local people. This paper gives the historical background on how Coventry became a ‘city of peace and reconciliation’ and explores ways in which public spaces and monuments have been used to reinforce the ‘peace identity’ of the city. The various ‘peace sites’ in the city are described, and the question is raised as to how such sites can have an impact on public consciousness. Coventry is a ‘city of peace’ on a symbolic level, but it could go further in terms of its policies and political support for peace. Nevertheless, Coventry, with its strong peace heritage, illustrates some of the ways that cities can help build a culture of peace.

Introduction

Much has been written on the negative effects of viewing violence in various cultural forms, such as in films, on television and in video games, but there has been much less research on the positive effects of peace imagery. To what extent and in what ways can symbols of peace, as reflected for example in public spaces, memorials, and monuments, contribute to peace? Moving beyond the symbolic, in what ways can cities promote peace, both through the use of public spaces and through particular policies and activities? These questions will be addressed by looking at the development of Coventry, U.K. as a ‘city of peace and reconciliation.’

Historical background

The massacre of civilians in the 1937 bombing of Guernica by Hitler’s Luftwaffe, with the agreement of Franco, shocked the world. So too did the German bombing of Coventry in 1940. On the night of 14 November, German aeroplanes dropped over 4000 firebombs on the city, killing hundreds of people and destroying large parts of the city, including its medieval cathedral.

The legacy of Coventry as a ‘city of peace and reconciliation’ began that year, when the Provost of the cathedral urged people not to seek revenge, but to forgive, not only the Germans, but all humanity for the scourge of war. Many people branded him a traitor, as he had issued his plea in the midst of war. After the war, he initiated reconciliation links with cities in Germany, starting with Dresden, where thousands had died in the firebombing of that city by the Allied forces. Successive provosts of the Cathedral have continued and expanded on that reconciliation

work, organising joint British-German work projects, youth exchanges and many other peace-related programmes.

In that same spirit of reconciliation, Coventry became twinned with other ‘martyred’ cities throughout the world, including Hiroshima, Stalingrad, Lidice and Caen. Over the years up until the mid 1980s, Coventry continued to establish links with cities around the world, with a total of twenty-six in all. Interestingly, these include both Belgrade and Sarajevo, cities on opposite sides of the violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Thus both Coventry cathedral and the city council have promoted and developed the ‘peace identity’ of the city. This identity was further enhanced with the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Coventry University in 2000.

Public spaces, memorials and monuments

The cathedral ruins. The ruins of the bombed cathedral, which stand next to the new cathedral are in themselves a ‘peace site’. They are a reminder of the destruction of war, and are a place of pilgrimage visited by thousands of people every year. Inside the ruins there is a sacred space dedicated to peace – an altar with a charred cross. This cross is a replica of two beams found lying in a cruciform shape in the rubble on the morning after the bombing of the cathedral. On the wall behind the altar are the words ‘Father Forgive’, reflecting the words of Provost Howard. Every Friday at noon, a ‘Litany of Reconciliation’ is read out at the altar, reaffirming the mission for peace and reconciliation, and linking the cathedral with people at other reconciliation centres around the world who also recite the litany at the same time¹.

The ruins are used for many different peace-related events, such as Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, the launch of the annual ‘Peace Month,’ and events dedicated to reconciliation with Germany and Japan. Because the altar is a Christian religious site, events of a more secular nature are held not at the altar, but at another key ‘peace monument’ in the ruins, the sculpture “Reconciliation” by Josefina Vasconcellos. Originally entitled “Reunion” it depicts a man and a woman embracing each other, and has come to symbolize the reconciliation of all those divided by war. Identical versions of the sculpture have been placed in the Peace Garden at Hiroshima, a church in Berlin, and the gardens of Stormont, Northern Ireland, on behalf of the people of Coventry.

Memorial to civilians killed in war

In the cathedral grounds beside the ruins there lies a large tombstone with the inscription: “Unknown Civilians Killed in War.” The original version of this stone was carried on a ‘Stonewalk’ in the U.S., during July and August 1999, from the Peace Abbey at Sherborn, Massachusetts, to Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C. Thousands of people were involved in pulling the stone on a cart through cities along the way, and paying tribute to the innocent victims of

¹ Coventry Cathedral is linked with 150 reconciliation centres around the world, through a network called the Community of the Cross of Nails. This network takes its name from nails originally found in the cathedral ruins and formed into a cross, as a symbol of reconciliation. Replicas of these ‘crosses of nails’ have been given to all the Christian-based reconciliation centres, while centres representing other faith communities are given a miniature version of the sculpture ‘Reconciliation’ which is in the Cathedral ruins.

war. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery is one of the country's most sacred monuments. The aim of the Stonewalk project was to create an equally sacred monument at the same location – dedicated to the millions of civilian victims of war, half of whom have been children. The memorial stone looks not only to the tragic past, but also to the future, with hope for the abolition of war. The stone in Coventry lies in the shadows of the old cathedral and is often not noticed by visitors. Some people, however, leave flowers or messages, remembering the dead and reaffirming the need for peace.

The Future Monument

In the cathedral grounds and at other sites in the city centre, there are numerous other peace monuments and spaces, including a 'peace pole'; sculptures commemorating twin cities; and a 'garden of international friendship'. One of the most interesting peace sites is in Millennium Place, in the heart of the city, and is called the Future Monument². The Future Monument was designed by Jochen Gerz, a German artist who is known for his 'anti-monuments'.³ As he has described, a monument usually commemorates something in the past, but this monument is about the future, which sounds like a contradiction in terms. Similar to some of his other public art projects in Germany and France, this monument was created through a process that involved the local community in its creation.

As part of the project, Coventry University art students and local groups assisted Gerz in carrying out a survey with one main question: "Who are the enemies of the past?" The theme of the monument was to be that 'enemies of the past become the friends of the future'. The monument itself is a glass obelisk surrounded by plaques sunk into the surrounding floor, each of which celebrates a former enemy (as selected through the survey) having become a friend. Another ring of smaller plaques around the obelisk represents the many different communities to be found in Coventry.

Thus there are many public spaces in Coventry that are symbolic of peace and they are a part of the city's heritage and identity.

Collective memory and a peace identity in Coventry

The city of Coventry takes pride in its peace heritage. At commemorative events and in the city's publications, local people, including politicians, often note its history of promoting peace and reconciliation. This 'peace identity' seems to transcend party politics and is in fact seen by some as a 'marketing strategy' for the city. This peace identity became further established in 2003, when signs were placed at major routes entering the city, welcoming people to 'Coventry, City of Peace and Reconciliation.'

² Descriptions of these various peace sites have been compiled by the city council into a booklet called the Peace Trail, which leads visitors to each of them in the city centre.

³ In Harburg, Germany, for example, Jochen Gerz constructed a 'Monument against Fascism' which consisted of a forty-foot high lead column sunk into the ground and lowered down in stages until it disappeared in 1993. Local people were encouraged to write messages on the column, the idea being that in doing so 'we commit ourselves to remain vigilant.' Monuments are usually meant to last, but this one in fact disappeared. For further discussion of such monuments, see James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

Another interesting development, which will further enhance the peace identity of the city, is the proposed creation of a 'Peace and Reconciliation Gallery' in a city centre museum located adjacent to Coventry Cathedral and Coventry University. It will tell the history of the bombing and subsequent initiatives for reconciliation with Germany and Japan, its links with cities around the world, and its ongoing activities related to peace. It will also present exhibitions on a range of peace-related themes and issues of a contemporary nature.

All of these aspects of Coventry's culture – the telling of its narrative history, the use of public 'peace spaces', the naming of the city, and the creation of a peace and reconciliation gallery - contribute to Coventry's peace identity, but operate mainly on a symbolic level. In what ways can or does the city promote peace more directly through its policies and activities?

From symbolism to action: municipal peace policies

In the U.S. in the 1980s a movement emerged for 'municipal peace diplomacy' in which many cities took on what effectively was their own foreign policy. In Britain, municipal peace policies were put forward by local 'peace and emergency planning units' which refused to implement preparations for nuclear war and instead promoted peace education. Particularly effective was the 'nuclear weapons-free local authorities' movement, in which cities in Britain, the U.S., New Zealand, and other countries refused to have any dealings with nuclear weapons research, production, or transport.⁴ That network is still active today.

Although Coventry designates itself a 'peace city' it is not a member of the network of nuclear-weapons free cities. In fact, in terms of weaponry, Coventry was in the past a major centre for arms production, which made it a prime target for the bombing in the Second World War. Some industries in the city still have military-related contracts.

Another contradiction to the 'peace identity' of the city is that during the recent war on Iraq, the city council did not take a stand against the war, as did many local authorities in the U.S. This has led to some local peace activists in Coventry criticizing the city for what could be considered an empty claim to being a 'city of peace and reconciliation.'

Nevertheless, the city can in fact point to a number of activities that have been ongoing for many years, which do promote peace. For example, a Lord Mayor's Peace Committee campaigns on peace issues and sponsors events such as an annual Peace Lecture. There are also local peace and justice organisations, not associated with the city council, which are actively working for peace and justice, as there are in many cities.

The collective identity of Coventry as a peace city is one that is officially promoted and is reinforced in the many ways described above. However, it is difficult to judge the extent to which individuals and groups, the 'general populace', actually identify with this image. In a recent local election that ousted the ruling Labour group in favour of the Conservatives, the main issue seemed to be the need to repair roads. Subsequently city council funds for the proposed Peace and Reconciliation gallery were cut, and are now being raised privately. There is thus some

⁴ Bob Overy, "Municipal Peace Policies: Prospects for the Future," in Carol Rank, ed., *City of Peace: Bradford's Story* (Bradford, U.K.: Bradford Libraries, 1997).

question as to the extent to which the city's 'peace identity' is actually being imposed 'from above.' Nevertheless the widespread support and participation of local people peace activities, such as during Peace Month, indicates that a significant proportion of the population does in fact identify with the city's peace tradition.

Coventry is an extremely diverse city in terms of the number of faiths and ethnic groups represented there. In terms of 'identity' people might identify more with their faith community, as Muslims, Hindus, or Sikhs, for example, than with the peace identity of the city per se. Nevertheless, 'identity' is not a monolithic concept; people can have a multiplicity of facets to their identities, some of which may overlap.⁵ In Coventry there is an awareness of the need to be inclusive in terms of what 'peace' means, so that other 'identities' can be recognized. One example of this is an annual 'Multi-faith Peace Walk' in which local people walk from one place of worship to another throughout the city, hosted by the different religious groups.

Coventry can indeed lay claim to the naming of itself as a peace city, based on its history, its many symbolic public 'peace spaces' and some of its ongoing activities. It could go further, however, in terms of policies and political support for peace initiatives.

Public consciousness and the building of a peace culture

In Britain, as in many if not most countries throughout the world, there are far more war monuments than peace monuments. There is what could be called an institutional and symbolic domination of war over peace.⁶ The ruins of Coventry cathedral could have been turned into a conventional war memorial that would have reinforced patriotism and nationalism through honouring the sacrifice of those who died. As such it would have been what Pierre Nora has called a 'dominant' form of remembrance, imposed by a national authority.⁷

Instead, the transformation of the ruins from a war memorial to a peace site was a locally-based phenomenon which evolved over time and became reinforced through the retelling of Coventry's history, ongoing rituals such as the reading of the Litany of Reconciliation, and the many peace-related events held in the ruins. Developing peace sites and municipal peace identities can thus be seen as a form of cultural resistance – a way of counteracting the acceptance of war as a 'legitimate' form of 'politics by other means' as the well-known phrase from von Clausewitz describes it.⁸

5 For a discussion of identity in relation to memorials and monuments, see John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

6 This terminology is used by Richard Bennett in his article "Centers, Museums, and Public Memorials for Nonviolent Peacemaking in the U.S.: A Visitors Guide." *Peacework*, Issue 295, May 1999. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Friends Service Committee). See also J.R. Bennett, *Peace Movement Directory: North American Organizations, Programs, Museums, and Memorials*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2001).

7 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Les Lieux de Memoire Representations*, vol. 26., cited in Catherine Moriarty, "Private Grief and Public Remembrance: British First World War Memorials," in Martin Evans and Ken Lunn, eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997).

8 A common translation of the quote is "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means." Karl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832).

The 'peace identity' of Coventry is supported by the local authority, is politically mainstream, and apparently not contentious.⁹ However Coventry's peace identity is also counter-cultural in that it promotes peace and reconciliation in a world where the perpetuation of violent conflict is almost taken for granted as inevitable. Developing 'cities of peace' is one way of contributing to the creation of a peace culture, from the local to the global level.

9 This is seen for example in the support given by the local press to peace-related events and activities and to Coventry as a 'city of peace and reconciliation.' It is also evidenced by the hundreds of individuals and groups who participate in peace activities during Peace Month in October/November, and at other times of the year.