

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



## Aristophanic pacifism

Wilbur Burton

Autumn 1951

THE GREEKS DIDN'T HAVE A WORD FOR PACIFISM. The term, according to Funk & Wagnalls, is of recent coinage, although of obvious derivation, and a "pacifist" is defined as "one who opposes military ideals, war, or military preparedness and proposes that all international disputes be settled by arbitration." Under this definition there may be several varieties of pacifism; ranging from an absolutist conviction that it is better to be killed than to kill, to active acceptance of war under certain circumstances—for example, in genuine self-defence when all efforts for arbitration have failed.

The absolutist conviction that it is better to be killed than to kill is so utterly alien to me that I would not argue about it; I can recognise it only as a unique individual attitude, thoroughly justifiable for those who sincerely feel that way, but as far removed from actual politics as a Hindu mystic on his bed of spikes.

Pacifism as a political proposition—or pretension—is another matter. Although I have never regarded myself as a pacifist, I could—*if* pacifism were viewed as an inevitably limited part of a philosophy of life instead of a whole philosophy, and were

Wilbur Burton  
Aristophanic pacifism  
Autumn 1951

Retrieved on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020 from  
<https://libcom.org/library/aristophanic-pacifism>

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**

activated by anthropocentric actualities instead of mystical romanticism; and this is the burden of my essay.

The Greeks didn't have a word for *pacifism*, but they produced in Aristophanes—best, bawdiest and boldest of their dramatists—the profoundest pacifist, and the only politically sound one, of all time. He was no peacetime pacifist, instead all three of his greatest anti-war plays—*The Acharnians*, *Peace* and *Lysistrata*—were written and *publicly* produced during the prolonged Peloponnesian War; and the first and greatest of these, *The Acharnians*, was presented in the early part of the war, when “patriotism” was still at fever pitch. Indeed, *The Acharnians* is an outstanding landmark of history, for it was the first time in the annals of mankind that a *pacifistic* protest against a war was made *publicly* during the war. It is as significant as it is astonishing that Aristophanes was able to get away with it, even winning the highest prize of the dramatic festival in which it was entered; but this aspect of the matter has been admirably dealt with by that last great classicist of Western culture, Gilbert Murray, and is no part of my present thesis.

Also, for the first time in history, *The Acharnians* contained an implicit call for mass civil disobedience—as the only means of ending the war. The concept of civil disobedience may be found as far back as Aeschylus, and is explicit in the *Antigone* of Sophocles: but here it is only individual defiance of authority on moral and idealistic grounds. In *The Acharnians*, it becomes a political proposition, which is not philosophised about but simply avowed through the dramatic course of action.

Aristophanes, of course, was no absolute *pacifist*, for the concept that it is better to be killed than to kill, was unknown to all basic Western culture: it is an importation from Asia, where one way of living has immemorially been in negation of life. Absolutism of any kind is in the Asiatic rather than the Western tradition, though this fact may be—as Spengler would see it—merely a matter of phase. In any event, our Western tradition—

even up to now—is too empirical and eclectic for real faith in any absolutism, pacifistic or otherwise: and by virtue of this fact, it is to Aristophanic pacifism that pacifists should turn.

It cannot be said, to be sure, that Aristophanes was a successful pacifist. Certainly he did not succeed in halting the Peloponnesian War, and it could hardly have lasted longer than it did. History is silent on public reaction to his plays, beyond the fact that he won first prize with *The Acharnians*, and second prize with *Peace*. But it is a fair surmise that the *attitude* manifested by Aristophanes had a mitigating, salubrious effect on the public attitude: for even in defeat Athens still continued for a long time to be the most civilised city in the Western world, and was able to pass on much of the best of her heritage to Rome. We can also assume that the attitude of Aristophanes was not without effect on Euripides, who changed during the war from the patriot of *The Heracleidae* and *The Suppliants*—with their vaunting of Athenian “democracy”, piety and concern for the oppressed—to the anti-war pleader of *The Trojan Women*, which, however, dealt with contemporary events only by covert analogy. An Aristophanic influence is also indicated in Thucydides—albeit *ex post facto*.

All this is something, even much, though far short of absolute success. But only an absolutist would expect absolute success. For a pioneer in the field of pacifism, *Aristophanes* did quite well.

Certainly Aristophanes could not be followed today in slavish discipleship, such as some pacifists accord to Gandhi and others to Christ—although the Peloponnesian War offers in microcosm what World War II has presented and World War III will present, in microcosm. Even so, *The Acharnians* and *Peace* were of their time “fantastic in detail but realistic in essence,” as Oates and O’Neill put it. *Lysistrata* is still more fantastic, if taken literally, but—as I will later show—in all its psycho-sociological implications, it is thoroughly down to earth.

It is the attitude of the three plays that is profoundly and soundly meaningful—if pacifism is to be a political proposition instead of a political pretension, or merely an individual way of life. And to be a political proposition, pacifism must appeal to the average man in his tradition: which for us in America is the Western tradition as modified by American conditions. The pacifism of Christ or Gandhi, on the other hand, can never be more than a political pretension in America (or an individual way of life), for either source makes pacifism more ridiculous—and even more repulsive—to the average man than militarism. It is true that we have a Christian avowal to appeal to, which may be interpreted as pacifistic, but to take this avowal seriously for political purposes is considerably more fantastic than to take *Lysistrata* literally.

Aristophanes was (like all Greeks before the degenerated neo-Platonist) thoroughly anthropocentric—hence fundamental; and his appeal was to the average Athenian, who in the main, was politically quite like the average American of today. Aristophanic pacifism was not pacifism in any absolute sense, but simply as common sense. War may sometimes be necessary and/or inevitable, but common sense will make either its necessity or inevitability very rare, and prevent any war from being prolonged. With common sense, a *crusade* would be regarded as utter madness. Further, but still strictly as common sense, Aristophanic pacifism embraces peace as a beautiful nude goddess—about whom the Laconian envoy in *Lysistrata* says, laconically: “Ah, great gods! What a lovely bottom Peace has!” With the goddess, of course, goes a full wine-skin and provender to match. For peace is both comestible and calipygian.

Those interested in Aristophanic pacifism must, naturally, read the three plays I have noted—preferably in the Random House two-volume edition of the *Complete Greek Drama*, edited by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill Jr., for herein is a complete non-Bowlderised translation (save in one slight

from to keep the Black Market flourishing! But “no parole” is fatuous for one or just a few.

As to the guinea-pig pacifists, words fail me—I can conclude only that their consciences bothered them for being C.O’s. Of course there is still time enough to prevent the next war—if there is enough Aristophanic pacifism. So in ultimate note I wilt quote again from Aristophanes, in *The Frogs*:

*Even now O race demented, there is time to change  
your ways;  
Use once more what’s worth the using. If we ’scape,  
the more the praise  
That we fought our fight with wisdom; or if all is lost  
for good,  
Let the tree on which they hang us be, at least, of  
decent wood!*

while to avow the utmost in advance and then retract is craven  
...

If one is in opposition to war and then when it comes retreats into complete silence on the thoroughly sound grounds that one does not want to go to prison, there is at least no dishonour. But it is specious and criminally misleading to trim; at the best, only the most superficial good can thereby be accomplished; and in the main you actually play into the hands of the state: for the half truths you can tell with impunity are more pernicious than outright lies, and their very telling is a tragic travesty of civil liberties.

From my individual viewpoint, prison is much more comfortable than an army camp somewhere near the North Pole; but a good pacifist might well prefer the army. And, indeed, an adequate leaven of pacifists in the army would be more effective in ending a war quickly than only a few thousand in prison. Also, ten draft-dodgers in the hills are far better than five in prison.

All of us, I dare say, are now willing to plead *mea culpa* for something we did or didn't do in the last war. I plead *mea culpa* for having been silly enough to co-operate with the authorities by telling them where they could find me to arrest me. Whether I would actively attempt to avoid arrest would depend on circumstances (and perhaps mood), but certainly I would never give the least aid to the authorities in locating me. I don't plead *mea culpa* for accepting parole—when that was the custom of practically all of those with whom I associated; but in principle, if one goes to prison one should refuse any parole in co-operation with the state—and it is co-operating with the state *for the war* to fill posts of whatever nature that are vacant because of the war. Let the state attend to its own dirty work at home and abroad without the aid of publicly avowed pacifists! It would be as effective pacifism to obtain, covertly, draft-proof jobs in munition plants and use the usufructs there-

instance) and comprehensive notes that explain things which otherwise would be obscure save to a classical scholar. For the whole of the Aristophanic attitude—of which pacifism was only a part—all of his eleven extant plays should be read, even though a few are lousy as drama and *The Clouds* is singularly inept from any viewpoint. His three anti-war plays are his best, but at least *The Wasps*, *The Frogs* and *The Ecclesiazusae* should also be read for their penetrating commentaries on democratic politics—with much current applicability.

Since there can be no substitute for reading the three anti-war plays—which, incidentally, are second to none in all literature purely as entertainment—I will deal only with some of their highlights that bear on my thesis of their current significance: a significance partly noted by Oates and O'Neill when they say of *The Acharnians* that it lampoons “the proud gullibility of the Athenians, and the careless inhumanity of their foreign policy.” Oates and O'Neill, not being prophets, could not see when they wrote this *circa* 1937 how like Athens modern America would shortly become!

It may be recalled that the Peloponnesian War started by the New Dealer Pericles established a boycott of Megara, and the plot of *The Acharnians* involves its hero, Dicaeopolis—Honest Citizen—negotiating his own private truce with Laconia for the noble and sufficient purpose of procuring Copaic eels and other delicacies that came from or through Megara. Dicaeopolis did not seek eternal or international peace, nor world government, nor universal control of the manufacture of swords; instead he was content with a 30 year *truce*—which as things now move would be the equivalent of a century—but enraged patriots start to lynch him for treating “with a people who know neither gods, nor truth, nor faith.” (How familiar is that line!) He escapes lynching and eventually faces the mob to defend himself.

“I shall not please, but I will say what is true”, he declares, and while he avows that he detests the Lacedaemonians with all

his heart, he asks why accuse them of all our woes?—nor does he prate about the superiority of Athenian democracy over Spartan totalitarianism. He lambasts the alien war-mongers, but puts the bulk of the blame on the New Dealer Pericles—“ aflame with ire on his Olympian height” depicts the upset of Attica in down-to-earth manner, including “the sound of whistles, of flutes and fifes to encourage the workers,” and comes to the “general conclusion” that “*we have no common sense.*”

The mob finally won over, the chorus sings: “If you no longer allow yourselves to be too much hoodwinked by strangers or seduced by flattery, if in politics you are no longer the ninnies you once were, it is thanks to him.”

In *Peace*, the theme is the same with merely new dramatic variations. Trygaeus wants peace to caress his mistress and poke the fire to invoke Hermes, the Graces, the Horae, Aphrodite and Eros. By this time the gods are pictured as so disgusted with all the Greeks that they have abandoned Olympus to War and his slave Tumult, who have cast Peace into a deep pit—and the plot involves her rescue and an Aristophanic revel in consequent celebration. *Rescued with Peace are the goddesses of harvests and festivals*

Lysistrata—Disbander of Armies—and her Feminine International are the sheerest fantasy in plot, but sex appeal for peace is psychologically as sound as in recruiting for war: militarists have merely been more astute than pacifists. Indeed, as both Lucretius and Freud have observed, only the erotic instincts are capable of overcoming, or at least mitigating, the aggressive instincts. Further, Aristophanes in *Lysistrata* is saying for all the ages that the only way women can contribute to peace or other human well-being is by being *feminine* instead of *feminist*. Lysistrata, contrary to some interpretations of her, is no frigid feminist, or sexually unemployed leader of a cause; she shows an excellent appreciation of sex, but also has foresight and a capacity for restraint. When some of her colleagues avow they would rather go through fire than

forego sex, she holds them in line by showing them that some immediate sacrifice for peace will bring more sex in the long run.

Lysistrata also seizes the treasury and announces “no more money, no more war.” The magistrate asks, “then money is the cause of war?”—and Lysistrata answers: “And of all our troubles. It was to find occasion to steal that Pisander and all the other agitators were forever raising revolutions.”

This, of course, is over-simplification—even Marxian! But it is not without validity, although somewhat different in the U.S. of today than in ancient Athens; for at one point comparison between the Athenian role in the Peloponnesian War and the U.S. role in World Wars II and III breaks down completely: Athens received tribute from her allies. However, the essence of Aristophanes here, as in the economic aspect of *The Acharnians*, is the fullest possible politico-economic non-co-operation with the state for a war or in a war which we oppose and with the usufructs of this non-co-operation garnered for our own wellbeing.

If war comes against all the opposition common sense can muster, the pacifist attitude should then be to avoid any suffering insofar as he can instead of courting it: let the war-minded do the suffering, and the more the better. Away with Quixotic pacifism and all its sophomoric humanitarianism and do-gooding nonsense! Arise Aristophanic pacifism!

In wartime, we Americans have our well rooted tradition of civil disobedience; and obviously, the only rational course for a pacifist during a war is covert or overt non-co-operation with the state to the fullest extent possible within the limits of his capacity; and capacity includes how willing he is to take the consequences of either active or passive opposition to the war. One should decide *now* on one’s capacity; and unless we are very sure of ourselves the best decision is that we won’t stick our necks out any more than we have to. One can with honour always change that decision in the radically opposed direction,