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# Christian Peace Theology and Nonviolence toward the Truth: Internal Critique amid Interfaith Dialogue\*

Gerald W. Schlabach

## P R E C I S

*This article surveys theological debates over war and violence within the Christian tradition in a way that assumes others—particularly Muslims—are listening in. It presents Christian pacifism as the sort of internal critique that representatives of any faith tradition must honestly do in order to dialogue well with others in the service of peace. Practitioners of interfaith dialogue might thus recognize in this case study one of the first principles of their very discipline, namely, that nonviolence toward the truth is a commitment so basic to ecumenical and interfaith conversation that it may not be a goal at all but, rather, the beginning we must already have made in order to dialogue at all.*



Perhaps it is unwise to begin an essay in service of Muslim-Christian dialogue by citing a controversial commentator weighing in on still another controversy, but bear with me while I refer to an op-ed piece in September, 2006, by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman on “Islam and the Pope.” Friedman actually said very little about the controversial

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\*This essay was presented with the title “Christian Peace Theology: Internal Critique and Interfaith Dialogue” in two venues: the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, Faith and Peace Day (Minneapolis, MN, in March, 2014); and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Center Symposium (University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN, in November, 2014), with guests from Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey.

quotation concerning Islam that Pope Benedict XVI had included in a lecture two weeks earlier in Regensburg, Germany. Instead, Friedman used the occasion to identify the kind of dialogue he considered most urgent—not *interfaith* dialogue between different Abrahamic religions but *intra-faith* dialogue between believers within a given Abrahamic faith. I risk citing Friedman, therefore, to direct his point back at my own faith tradition: Although Friedman directed his appeal toward Muslims, he could just as easily have done so toward Christians.

The world certainly needs an honest and respectful dialogue between Christianity and Islam, Friedman wrote, as well as an honest and respectful dialogue between Islamic-majority countries and Western ones. Above all, “there needs to be a respectful, free dialogue between Muslims and Muslims.” Despite many years as a Middle East correspondent, which had allowed him to see “the compassionate side of Islam in action” repeatedly, Friedman admitted that he was increasingly confused about what Islam stands for today. And, if *he* was confused—he implied—no wonder that the “Western masses” were, too. So, if the world is to avoid “the slow-motion clash of civilizations that [Harvard political scientist Samuel] Huntington predicted,” Friedman argued, then the dialogue we all need most urgently is one between Muslims themselves. “What matters is not what Muslims tell us they stand for,” in fact. “What matters is what they tell themselves, in their own languages, and how they treat their own.”<sup>1</sup>

It is of the very nature of the case Friedman was making that Muslims themselves must decide whether Friedman was right. I am not sure whether he was or not; I cite him neither to chide him nor to chime in with him. If Friedman had anything valid whatsoever to say about the urgency of *intra-faith* dialogue within the Islamic *ummah* or global community, that itself is something for Muslims to decide, not I, or even he. Non-Muslims can only elaborate by noting that Muslims must also be the ones to say where any such dialogue is happening most fruitfully, which texts are most suggestive, which resources in the tradition are most helpful, and so on.

All of this offers a lesson for every dialogue, a lesson that we might easily neglect in our heartfelt desire for progress in *interfaith* dialogue between religions. The lesson here is two-pronged. Its first point is that *intrafaith* dialogue may well have an impact on *interfaith*, cross-cultural dialogue, and

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Islam and the Pope,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2006.

sometimes that impact will be momentous. Of course, the inverse is also true: When other faiths or cultures pose new questions for our own traditions, the dialogues within our traditions become richer and better focused.

There is a second point to this two-pronged lesson: Even when all this is so, it is no less true that every intrafaith dialogue must proceed according to its own integrity if it is to prove fruitful—and that is no less true when others are listening in upon our intramural, intrafaith debates with intense interest, hoping they will bear fruit beyond the confines of that tradition.

Within Christianity, pacifist communities and advocates of nonviolence have been trying for centuries to play very much the role and elicit very much the same debates that Friedman has called for among Muslims today. Christians committed to nonviolence did this in one way within their ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman contexts. They have done so in other ways over the last five centuries. One must always beware of anachronistic readings that would attempt to read a contemporary phenomenon such as modern pacifism back into early centuries, of course, but this much seems safe to affirm: By the witness of their words and very lives, nonviolent Christians have consistently posed a trenchant set of questions:

*What do we Christians really stand for? Others are watching; are we confusing them? Jesus loved us when we were still in rebellion against God, non-violent Christians observe, citing convictions basic to the simplest of Christian pieties, and he taught us in turn to love even our enemies. Nothing could do more, he said, to reveal the character of the God of Abraham. Do we not then send a most confusing message when, far from loving enemies, the way we treat even our own is violent and idolatrous? We make war against our brothers and sisters for temporal goods and in defense of earthly kingdoms. How then will unbelievers recognize the gospel of Jesus or the covenant faithfulness of the one he called Father?*

To recount this Christian tradition, even as we do so in the service of Muslim-Christian dialogue, we must first let it proceed in its own “language,” appeal to its own texts, and begin from its own theological assumptions. Perhaps this will seem risky, because Christians debating other Christians may well find that their strongest arguments rely on the most particular of Christian beliefs and doctrines, which other faiths cannot be expected to share. If nothing else, however, such a strategy is simply honest and transparent.

Larger lessons emerge, however. It is this very vulnerability—which a Christian who seeks to renounce violence must learn from the very particular life and death of Jesus, but that emerged in the thought of Mahatma Gandhi as well—that may have the most to contribute to interfaith dialogue. Whatever believers in other religious traditions might decide they should learn from Christians as they listen in on intrafaith Christian ecumenical dialogue, practitioners of interfaith dialogue may find themselves recognizing one of the first principles of their very discipline: *Nonviolence toward the truth* is a commitment so basic to ecumenical and interfaith conversation that it may not be a goal at all but, rather, the beginning we must already have made in order to dialogue at all.

### A Case for Christian Pacifism, from the Core of Christian Theology

We must state frankly that the strongest case for Christian pacifism may well begin in theological convictions that Muslims cannot be expected to share, unless by way of analogies that they, not Christians, may best identify. These are convictions evident in the very oldest of Christian creeds or confessions of faith, embedded in New Testament texts: “Crucified and resurrected for us” who are sinners, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

To discern the oldest and most basic core of the Christian proclamation or *kerygma* is, to be sure, a challenge that has occupied numerous biblical scholars for well over a century.<sup>3</sup> Since Muslims believe that their

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<sup>2</sup>The late A. James Reimer likewise emphasized the need for Mennonites and other historic peace churches to ground their Christian pacifism in classical Christian theology of the Trinity. See A. James Reimer, “Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Theology from a Radical Protestant Perspective,” in S. Mark Heim, ed., *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, Papers of Faith to Creed Consultation, Waltham, MA, 1989 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pp. 129–161; idem, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church’s Teachings and Practices*, Facets Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. x, 33–34, 53–54, and 171–175; and idem, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen, Theopolitical Visions 17 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), pp. 2–9 and 54.

<sup>3</sup>For simplification of presentation in this interfaith context, I will rely on Peter’s sermon in Acts 2. I am aware that no serious biblical scholars would consider the sermons in the Book of Acts to be exact transcripts, and many would suspect that even if the author of Luke and Acts were benefiting from accounts passed down through oral tradition (see Lk. 1:1–4; cf. Acts 1:1–2), he overlaid them with his own theological emphases. Nonetheless, Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 gives enough signs of its primitive origins for scholars to use it as one among a number

foundational text, the Qurʾān, came in a much more direct fashion, the very need that Christians have to extract or de-embed their core beliefs through “source criticism” might seem a bit of an embarrassment. Nonetheless, the fact that the Christian gospel is embedded within complex histories of people and texts is a necessary reflection of the Christian faith itself. According to the faith of Christians and Jews before them, their texts have a history because God’s very revelation is historical. Since Abraham, God’s redeeming work has always required the creation of a people who will live out a particular history as a transformative witness within all human history—a people “blessed” not just for its own good but also to be a “blessing to all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:1–3). Even the unique and uniquely revelatory event of Jesus is seen not to displace but to fulfill the history of God’s faithful action of keeping covenant with the Hebrew people while beckoning and cajoling them to become a “light to the nations.”<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, on Pentecost, the very first day of church history, the apostle Peter made sure to connect God’s new historical act with the ongoing history of the covenant people. Peter’s most immediate task was to explain for public onlookers the prophetic outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). Citing the Hebrew prophet Joel, he insisted that God’s purpose had always been to pour out the Holy Spirit not simply on prophetic individuals but on “all flesh”—on all manner of persons, young and old, men and women, slaves as well as mighty—whom God was gathering from all nations into a renewed people. Apparently, even the most dramatic of new

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of key resources for discerning the outline of earliest Christian proclamation or *kerygma*. (Taken in isolation from other New Testament texts, for example, the Acts 2:36 affirmation that God had *made* Jesus both Lord and Messiah would seem to support an “adoptionist” understanding of Jesus’ relationship to God that later Christian theology would soon find inadequate. This provides strong evidence for its authentic antiquity.) For far more detailed studies identifying the earliest and most basic core of Christian faith, based on texts from throughout the New Testament, see Ben F. Meyer, “The Gospel Literature: Data on Jesus?” chap. 3 in his *The Aims of Jesus*, with a new introduction by N. T. Wright, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 48 (San Jose, CA.: Pickwick Publications, 2002), pp. 60–75; Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), pp. 76–81 and 86–97; and, above all, Larry W. Hurtado’s monumental work, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), especially pp. 108–118, 179–184, and 650–651. I thank my colleague John Martens for help in reviewing this literature.

<sup>4</sup>Is. 42:6 and 49:6.

revelations descending directly from above through the power of God's Holy Spirit would be unintelligible apart from God's ongoing work in history.

What might merely seem a methodological aside concerning how to retrieve the core Christian proclamation or *kerygma*, therefore, actually has deeply theological and ethical import. It is completely of a piece with the entirely orthodox Christian conviction that God's strength reveals itself most fully in apparent weakness.<sup>5</sup> We refer in the first instance, of course, to Jesus' coming in the very weakness of human flesh, then crucified in the most gruesome and humiliating of deaths. In the cross Christians believe they recognize the very character of the God of the universe, who consistently subjects the divine Word to the vicissitudes of human history, not despite but because of God's greatness and grace.

What Peter most needed to explain on Pentecost day, then, was God's unexpected vindication of an unlikely way of messianic liberation. You encountered Jesus of Nazareth for yourself, Peter reminded his listeners. Nazareth was a backwater town in an outlying province, an unlikely source of greatness. Nevertheless, God had "attested" to him with "deeds of power, wonders, and signs." Jesus' deeds of power—Peter's listeners would have recalled—were acts of healing and feeding and compassion for outcasts, not military prowess. Even so, his ministry and teaching were threatening enough that Jewish and Roman authorities had conspired to end his work with the exclamation point of crucifixion.<sup>6</sup> "But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24). Turning to texts from the Hebrew scriptures, Peter argued that Jesus' turning out to be the messiah should not have been so altogether surprising. Still, Peter himself had required the vindication of resurrection and illumination by the Holy Spirit to comprehend Jesus' identity fully.<sup>7</sup> Now, however, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. 2 Cor. 12:9, as well as Augustine's *Confessions*, book 7, section 18.24 and ff.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:32 has been used for antisemitic purposes, since it records Peter bluntly saying to his Jewish listeners: "You crucified and killed [this man, Jesus] by the hands of those outside the law." However, this very verse conveys the responsibility that the Roman occupiers shared. Crucifixion was their trademark technique of political execution, after all, and it is they who are the ones outside the law or Torah whose hands were required for it to be carried out at all.

<sup>7</sup> Peter's difficulty in accepting Jesus as a messiah who would suffer—and his failure to identify with Jesus as he neared death—is a prominent element in the drama of Jesus' ministry



us are witnesses” (Acts 2:31). The message of God’s act of vindication was that God was showing “this Jesus” who had been crucified to be “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36).

*Kyrios Christos*—Jesus Christ is Lord. This basic confession recurs at the core of other early proclamations and hymns embedded in New Testament texts. Its simple formula may even constitute the earliest Christian creed. In any case, it is prominent among a cluster of confessional affirmations that filled it out and gave it its intelligibility.<sup>8</sup> Centuries of repetition have now turned “Lord” into what might merely seem an honorific title, so that we easily miss its revolutionary claim. In the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of their scriptures from Hebrew to Greek, “*Kyrios*” was the word that ancient Jewish scholars had used for “*Elohim*,” the word that pious Jews spoke in place of the sacrosanct name for God, “*YHWH*.” Applied to Jesus, the unmistakable resonance of the title *Kyrios* bespoke the ground spring of what soon became orthodox Christian creedal affirmation—that Jesus is not just *from* God but *is* God incarnate, the Word of God made flesh, second person of the Trinity. Muslims may certainly find reason to conclude, at the end of the day, after every interfaith dialogue, that such an affirmation “associates” God, Allah, with another, thus verging on idolatry, yet along the path of dialogue Christians also have reason to ask that Muslims recognize the thoroughly anti-idolatrous implication and purpose of this claim.

To say—as Peter reportedly did on the day of Pentecost—that God was acting in history to reveal Jesus of Nazareth as “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36) was to make an extraordinarily powerful claim not only in its Jewish context but in its Roman setting as well. It was to proclaim that “Jesus Christ is Lord” meant that *this* one—crucified according to the most gruesome and humiliating of deaths, a death reserved for traitors and thus fraught with political overtones, but then vindicated by resurrection—is (of all people!) the true *Kyrios*. It was to say that the idolatrous Roman emperor whom his subjects called *Kyrios* or Caesar decidedly was not. To be sure,

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and passion. See Mk. 8:27–38; 14:28–31, 66–72 and parallels in other Gospels.

<sup>8</sup>I.e., that *this* man is the messiah and that such a messiah is *Lord* is all the more striking because he really did suffer, die, and rise from the dead, all on our behalf. Again, see Meyer and Hurtado for early and consistent evidence of these elements of Christian faith, proclaimed in tandem.

many Jews had been longing for God's Messiah to displace the Roman overlord, not to demonstrate a new and paradoxically nondomineering form of lordship. So, to say that *this* one was the Messiah or Christ was to say that God was fulfilling the hopes and longings of the Jewish people in a way that initially dismayed even Jesus' closest disciples. None less than Peter himself, after all, had tried to dissuade Jesus when he began to warn his disciples of his impending death; Peter and other disciples, too, were looking for a military uprising that would install the Messiah Jesus as a conventional ruler—with them as his lieutenants.<sup>9</sup>

For these Jewish disciples of Jesus to turn around, post-Pentecost, and proclaim the crucified Jesus as *Kyrios* was to critique the potential idolatry of their own nationalism wherein the cruelties of military occupation had invited the understandable temptation (as with any oppressed people) to relish the sacrifice of their enemies' lives in a military victory, thereby exalting their own identity over all others. The resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit had opened their eyes; Christianity now moved out into the gentile world, offering God's faithfulness toward the children of Abraham to all nations. As they did so, their very use of the confession, "Jesus is Lord," in turn became an affront to idolatrous Roman claims on behalf of the emperor who also called himself *Kyrios*.

To argue, then, that the strongest case for Christian pacifism begins in the core theological convictions of orthodox Christianity is not to dismiss other arguments for the thoroughgoing renunciation of lethal violence, but it is to locate them properly. Aided by the politically savvy development of Gandhian nonviolence in the twentieth century among social scientists such as Gene Sharp,<sup>10</sup> pacifists have strong arguments to make about which strategies of social change, peacebuilding, and security are most effective. However, these are secondary supporting considerations, for Christian pacifism does not finally rest on utilitarian arguments about "what works." Staking its ultimate claim on the character and ways of God, whose power and wisdom the apostle Paul identified precisely with the cross that seems so foolish to human beings (1 Cor. 1:18–25), Christian pacifism can also make a kind of natural-law argument about ways in which "those who bear

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<sup>9</sup> Mk. 8:27–34; 10:32–45.

<sup>10</sup> See Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 3 vols., ed. Marina Finkelstein (Boston, MA: Extending Horizons, 1973); Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom*, Extending Horizons Books (Boston, MA: P. Sargent Publishers, 1980).

crosses are working the grain of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> However, Christian pacifism is amenable to natural-law argumentation only if Christians take care to interrogate “nature” and “reality” in the light of Jesus rather than subjecting Jesus to preexisting categories of the natural that we have developed autonomously, apart from Jesus.

Certainly, anyone who cares about victims of violence and oppression must care about effectiveness in the pursuit of concrete results. According to Luke 4, Jesus inaugurated his ministry in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth by identifying himself with God’s promise in Isaiah 61 that the anointed one would bring a message of truly “good news to the poor” and would “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Such goals had their spiritual and transhistorical dimensions, yet were not *merely* otherworldly. How then to achieve them in history? Jesus did not even announce the goals of his ministry in Luke 4 until he had first faced and rejected three temptations in the wilderness, which upon close examination turn out to coincide with the ordinary stuff of politics in its standard forms. The tempter’s suggestion that Jesus turn stones into bread was not simply a way to stave off his own hunger but also coincided with the option to promote his movement through a demagogic appeal to the lowest-common-denominator of self-interest on the part of the populace. The tempter’s suggestion that Jesus throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and allow God to save him was not simply a misguided test of faith, but it also coincided with the option to manipulate the public through spectacle, thus winning a name that had more to do with shallow celebrity than with faithful witness. When the tempter showed Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” in an instant and offered to give Jesus “their glory and all this authority,” the problem was not only that Jesus would have to bow down to one other than God. More than that, the very kind of

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<sup>11</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1988), p. 58. Also see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), p. 246; and note Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*, Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001 (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001). Also, note the ways that A. James Reimer both evoked natural law traditions and urged Mennonites to forge a more adequate political theology as Christian pacifists by attending to theological convictions associated with it: Reimer, *Christians and War*, p. 54; and idem, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, pp. 7, 9, 54, and 117–122.

power that the tempter offered was incompatible with God's Reign—the violence of imperial conquest.

Luke and the other Gospels thus make clear that Jesus' encounter in the wilderness was only a preview of the very real political options that would tempt Jesus throughout his ministry—when he miraculously fed the people and they wanted to make him king, when he dramatically entered Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, but did so on a humble donkey rather than a war horse. Above all, right when his closest associates expected him at last to marshal a violent insurrection, he refused to kill for the justice of his cause and instead died for it.<sup>12</sup> The reason is not that his ministry was apolitical or unmoved by cries for justice and liberation but that Jesus was opting for a qualitatively different kind of politics. His would be a truly original revolution because it broke with the cycles of violence by which one regime after another throughout history has promised justice but recapitulated patterns of unjust domination as they sought their ends through violent means.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' inaugural message at Nazareth also hinted at his intention to open the gospel and its promise of liberation to all nations. Sooner or later, that universal scope does lead to the question of natural law. Jesus' hearers in Nazareth were initially quite glad to hear that the promise of justice, vindication, and "the year of the Lord's favor" was being fulfilled in their presence. However, just as their acclamation surged, Jesus spurned any assumption that they would automatically be its chief beneficiaries. The prophet Elijah had aided a needy widow in Sidon, he reminded them, and the prophet Elisha had cleansed a leper from Syria, even though there

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<sup>12</sup> Jn. 6:1–15; Mt. 21:1–17 and 26:51–53; Mk. 11:1–19; and Lk. 19:28–48.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller account of Jesus' teachings as a guide for breaking out of cycles of violence, see Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (Summer, 2003): 267–308; Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Glen H. Stassen, "Healing the Rift Between the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2005), pp. 89–105; idem, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006); and idem, "The Sermon on the Mount as Realistic Disclosure of Solid Ground," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2009), pp. 57–75. For a fuller elaboration of the political implications of Luke 4, see John Howard Yoder, "The Kingdom Coming," chap. 2 of his *Politics of Jesus*, pp. 21–59. The reference to "a revolution that would be truly original" derives from the title essay in John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, Christian Peace Shelf (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971).

were many with similar needs in Israel. Since both the widow and the leper were foreigners, the most obvious lesson here is, no doubt, that Jesus' unwelcome challenge to his hearers' nationalism (and our own, whoever we are) coincides with his teaching of nonviolent love for enemies.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Jesus' expectation that all peoples were prepared to receive the gospel carried with it a further implication that would later prompt the Christian tradition of reflection that we know as "natural law." If some capacity to receive the gospel is already present among all nations, there must also be some common human capacity for faith and morality that is operative through God's creation already prior to Christ's proclamation. It has been the task of Christian philosophers and theologians in the natural-law tradition to name that capacity and the principles that all fair-minded human beings *ought* to be able to recognize through its exercise, even apart from revelation.

Still, in marking a place for natural law *in this way*, a Christian pacifist is making the particular story of Jesus of Nazareth its lexical starting point, not universal principles. The paradox here is not insoluble, because the Jesus whom Christians believe to be fully divine they also believe to be fully human, thus revealing true human nature as surely as he revealed God's—through the contours of his very particular life at a time and place in history and culture. Looking backwards at the natural human realities that have prepared us to encounter the revelatory person of Jesus Christ, therefore, we may thus see dimensions of human nature and natural law that we would otherwise have missed. However, the methodological or epistemological order of proceeding here can be altogether decisive when we come to hard questions of violence in the face of unjust aggression. Take the crucial example of self-defense, which to most people seems to be a self-evident natural principle.<sup>15</sup> In hearing the call to follow Jesus, Christian disciples have heard that they must "take up their cross daily," for "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." If there is any self-evident right to self-defense here, Jesus has turned it quite on its head, for, although Jesus does not reprimand wanting to save one's life, he sets in motion a thorough reconsideration of what will actually, really, secure our futures.

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<sup>14</sup> Mt. 5:43–48; and Lk. 6:27–36.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II.94.2.

The point is not that the power of the cross is merely supernatural or anti-natural or that Christian hope resolves only in an otherworldly vindication. Quite to the contrary, the “wisdom of the cross” that first seemed so foolish brings into focus features of nature and social process that have always been present but that we in our sinful self-absorption might otherwise minimize or miss altogether. One of the twentieth century’s leading theologians representing the pacifism of historic peace churches, John Howard Yoder, pointed to numerous empirically verifiable ways in which, as he put it, “those who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.”<sup>16</sup> Groups lacking access to the reins of power are often the true agents of social change. The apparent powerlessness of their minority status allows them to forge creative pilot projects that demonstrate patterns of equity and reconciliation or service for the common good that society at large may later adopt. The success of these prophetic or creative minorities is not guaranteed, of course; the very power of their witness may elicit a reaction on the part of those who benefit from *status quo* structures of power. However, to hold fast to the ways of justice without resorting to violence in the defense of one’s cause, thus suffering unjustly, is to unleash yet another recognizable form of power—the power of martyrdom—by which the witness of a small committed group or even a single individual will sometimes do more to turn the tide of history than all the battalions arrayed to stifle them, by holding fast to their moral convictions even at the cost of their own deaths. Even in times that do not immediately demand moral heroism, the work of maintaining public order and true security arguably belongs far less to warriors than to all the quieter, unobtrusive actors who knit together and sustain bonds of social trust—based not on the logic of scarcity or threat but of abundance and generosity.<sup>17</sup>

Still—the Christian pacifist must reiterate—these utilitarian and natural law arguments are finally not the decisive reasons for Christian pacifism. Jesus is. It is wise to insist on this point, because pacifism, especially

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<sup>16</sup> See note 13, above. For examples of Yoder’s elaboration on the social power of nonviolence, see Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, pp. 38–39 and 240–241, and his extended list of ways that a creative minority can be an effective change agent in history even if it renounces the temptation to force change upon history as it appears in “Christ, the Hope of the World,” in Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, pp. 140–176.

<sup>17</sup> On this final point, see Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach, eds., *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), especially the three opening chapters.

of the liberal or humanist kind, has too often discredited itself by seeming to promise effectiveness in every case. Nor can Christian nonviolence claim to come naturally except insofar as our sin-distorted natures are being redeemed. To be sure, every kind of nonviolent practitioner does have a right to turn the question of effectiveness back upon proponents of violent military solutions. They not only make promises of success that are empirically dubious, but they also operate from a worldview that depends just as much on eschatological hope as any frankly religious one, only covertly so.<sup>18</sup> An honest debate over effective strategies of social change and self-defense, after all, requires a single rather than a double standard. People suffer and die in both military and nonviolent campaigns; the twentieth century has left us horrendous casualty numbers that hardly look favorable for militarists. Nonetheless, the very dynamics of active nonviolence require the Christian practitioner to eschew short cuts in favor of patient, ethically consistent living and acting, in the trust that God in Christ has already won the decisive battle against evil on the cross—and has done so nonviolently. The task of the Christian is therefore to live and act accordingly, confident that we no longer need to secure our own futures nor exact justice for ourselves, because God is at work bringing history to its fulfilment in the gift of God's Reign. Perhaps a Muslim will even want to call such trust *islam*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Duane Friesen emphasized this point in "In Search of Security: A Theology and Ethic of Peace and Public Order," chap. 2 in Friesen and Schlabach, *At Peace and Unafraid*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>19</sup> Harry Huebner, dean of Canadian Mennonite University, represented the Mennonite Central Committee in the West Bank earlier in his career. He recalled his surprise at visiting a Muslim cleric in Egypt in 1983 and hearing him begin his remarks by saying that "Islam is inherently a pacifist religion." Since Islam is about submitting our wills to Allah, he went on to explain, "How can we submit to Allah and at the same time take the life of someone Allah has willed to live?" To be sure, the cleric went on to argue in ways similar to just-war thinkers in Christian and Jewish traditions that "the need for justice in Allah's world . . . sometimes required exceptions to pacifism." Still, the encounter led Huebner to suggest that, in the context of interreligious dialogue, Christian pacifists might want to point out that "in some ways we are as Islamic as Islam. I mean by this that we are pacifists only because we submit ourselves to God who is acting in our world even when we cannot think of how to get from injustice to justice without violence. So, for us to take matters into our own hands and destroy another person's life as a way of getting to peace is an act of defiance against God, inconsistent with the reverent devotion due our life-giving creator. In other words, we are pacifist precisely because we submit our wills to God. We believe that violence is an act of unfaith" (Harry Huebner, "Reflections on Meeting with Ahmedinejad," presentation to the MCC Peace Committee, Akron, PA, 2008, pp. 1 and 4).

## Christian Pacifism and Christian Self-Critique

To argue that the strongest case for Christian pacifism begins in the core theological convictions of orthodox Christianity is also to name Christian pacifism as a centuries-long effort to do what Thomas Friedman has called for—but among Christians. In other words, as important as *inter-faith* dialogue is, we must echo his commentary on the need for *intrafaith* dialogue among Muslims by insisting that “What matters is not what [Christians] tell [Muslims] they stand for. What matters is what they tell themselves, in their own languages, and how they treat their own.” Christian pacifism may have become numerically and sociologically marginal since roughly the time of fourth-century Emperor Constantine, but when lived out consistently it constitutes a lived argument for Christian self-critique, for, it insists, from the core of Christian theology, that mainstream Christianity must repent of its historical recourse to violence if it is to be true to its Sovereign.

Jesus himself set the pattern. As Yoder argued in his classic work on *The Politics of Jesus*, when Jesus rejected the political options of his day, he was not opting for an apolitical stance but was forging a coherent alternative to what turn out to be the most recurring—even archetypal—political options facing Christians and others down through the centuries. The Sadducee party that represented the first-century priestly aristocracy in Israel cut deals with the ruling Roman overlords in order to insure the “domestic tranquility” that they needed to continue the cultic life of the nation and also to profit from the temple economy they controlled. The Pharisee party was a renewal movement stressing inner piety based on studious fidelity to the Mosaic Law; the Pharisees had little more hope than the Sadducees for a change in the political structure imposed by Roman occupation, except perhaps insofar as righteous devotion permeated Israel and thus prepared the nation for God’s Messiah to intervene. The Essenes radicalized these first two options as they withdrew into the desert; combining the Sadducees’ cultic emphasis with the Pharisees’ drive toward renewed purity, they rejected the corruption they believed to center in the Temple of Jerusalem and sought to form a purified community apart, dedicated to preparation for a Messiah who would violently purge the nation of both foreign and internally grown corruption. The Zealots, too, awaited a Messiah, but their



preparation was to begin building him an actual army and to initiate guerilla action against the Romans.

These four political options, then, have presented themselves to Christians throughout history: accommodation or working within the system, inward religious withdrawal through private religiosity, outward religious withdrawal through sectarian separation, and violent revolution. To be sure, Jesus located himself in conversation with all of these options, yet he broke especially with the ways that they all accommodated violence. He was as centered in the worship of God as the Sadducean priests claimed to be, but without their compromises; he preached inner renewal like a Pharisean rabbi, while embracing “sinners” who fell short; his proclamation of God’s Reign shared with the Zealots an expectation of justice but was all the more revolutionary for its nonviolence; and, key to all of these, Jesus, like the Essenes, founded a distinguishably new community, yet without withdrawing it from the larger society.

In idioms that sometimes seem strange to modern ears (but that actually speak in fresh ways to the requirements of Christian community in our postmodern, globalizing world), leading thinkers in the formative early centuries of the Christian tradition carried forward Jesus’ vision of a qualitatively original politics that did not require weapons to sustain the life of the community that embodied it. As these “church fathers” or “patristic writers” made their case for the authenticity of the Christian movement and the veracity of its gospel, one of their arguments was that the prophetic visions of Is. 2:1–5 and Mic. 4:1–7 were being fulfilled in the transethnic, transnational Christian church. As Irenaeus put it, when the apostles preached God’s word throughout the known world, they “caused such a change in the state of things, that [people from many nations] did form their swords and war-lances into ploughshares, and changed them into pruning-hooks for reaping the corn, [that is], into instruments used for peaceful purposes, [so that] they are now unaccustomed to fighting, but when smitten, offer also the other cheek.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heretics*, book 4, ch. 34.4. See also Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 29, and idem, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 90; Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, ch. 3; Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 5, ch. 33; and Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, section 52. These examples stretch from the second through the early fourth century of the Common Era. Pacifist scholars have

The reconciled character of the Christian community, bringing together people not only of different ethnicities and cultures but also of different social classes, was unique enough that some observers began calling Christians a third *genus* or race, after the gentiles and the Jews. Patristic writers hesitated to embrace the designation insofar as it undercut their own embrace of a single commonwealth of humanity and additionally carried the pejorative implication that they were freaks.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, still other church fathers affirmed in various ways that Christians constituted what we might call a transnational nation, living as resident aliens or exiles who could be at home in every nation because they belonged to another homeland.<sup>22</sup> As an identifiable people, but one spread through the nations as a diaspora people, they should be able both to transform history and to preserve their identity without territorial control.<sup>23</sup>

Every social movement comes to a watershed if it actually wins, and its leaders must decide whether and how to govern the changes for which they have been calling.<sup>24</sup> Christianity came to such a watershed in its fourth century. Though the tributaries flowing through that watershed were complex, the name of a single historical figure often marks the entire era. When the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 C.E., inserted himself in church affairs, and accepted baptism shortly before his death in 337, his policies required Christian bishops and theologians to rethink both their relationship to state power and the question of whether Christians may properly wield its sometimes-violent tools. Constantine himself may have delayed baptism in part because he continued to recognize the sword-bearing responsibilities of an emperor as incompatible with Chris-

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noted the suspicious fact that, after the Constantinian settlement, Christian apologists ceased using this argument to vindicate Christianity. See Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), pp. 27, 52, and 64.

<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *The Apology*, ch. 38; *Ad Nationes*, book 1, ch. 8. More affirmatively, see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, book 6, chs. 5–6.

<sup>22</sup> *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, chs. 5–6; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 10; *The Shepherd of Hermas*, similitude no. 1; Origin, *Against Celsus*, book 8, ch. 75; Pontius the Deacon, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr*, section 11; Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 43.49, recounting the interrogation of Basil the Great; and Augustine, *City of God*, book 19, chs. 17 and 26.

<sup>23</sup> See especially references to *The Shepherd of Hermas* and Origen in the previous footnote.

<sup>24</sup> Reimer has noted this dynamic and urged Christian pacifists to recognize the complex dynamics in the fourth-century developments that Constantine represents. See Reimer, *Christians and War*, pp/ 63–64 and 75; and idem, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, pp. 60–61.

tian faith and life.<sup>25</sup> Yet, Christian leaders were soon saying otherwise—celebrating the ascendancy of Christians into the ranks of civil authority and rationalizing Christian participation in the military.

Christian thought has divided ever since over whether the Constantinian settlement constituted a victory or a betrayal. In Eastern Christianity, Constantine is a saint, and, though the Roman Church has never canonized him, a feast day on the church calendar celebrates the basilica in Rome that he offered to the church. Pacifist Christian traditions, however, often use the term “Constantinianism” as a pejorative for the close cooperation of church and state that they consider a centuries-long mistake, if not an outright betrayal resulting in “the fall of the church.” If a consensus exists, it is that Christianity was in fact steadily winning over the Roman Empire and defeating the pagan religious ideology that undergirded it; the open question for debate, then, becomes what to do next at such a juncture. Even those theologians who argue that it would be irresponsible of Christians to refuse to participate in governments that are open to their influence often admit to the need for pacifist Christian communities to continue offering what I have called their “lived argument for Christian self-critique.” According to this view, even when— or especially when—the tragedy of human affairs requires an ethic other than Jesus’ own, the morally rigorous witness of pacifists must continue to pique the conscience of Christian rulers and soldiers who dirty their hands making necessary compromises, thus inculcating the humility and generosity toward adversaries that helps keep Christians loyal to Christ rather than Mars, the god of war.<sup>26</sup>

The medieval period demonstrates both the need and the recurrence of this Christian self-critique. The Constantinian watershed resulted in some commendable reforms that could help to limit violence, but it also set the stage for some of medieval Christendom’s most dubious exercises of violence. Christian emperors of the late Roman Empire outlawed the blood sports for which ancient Rome remains famous, for example. They also made Sunday a day of rest and discouraged infanticide by providing public

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Kreider, “Changing Patterns of Conversion in the West,” in Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 17–21.

<sup>26</sup> For a particularly influential example of this approach, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in his *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), pp. 1–32.

funds for raising abandoned children.<sup>27</sup> However, if Constantine had ushered in a period of religious tolerance by legalizing Christianity and lifting persecution, once Theodosius actually made Nicene Christianity the empire's official religion in the 380's state suppression of pagan practices took its place and opened the door to persecution of Christian heretics. Such later figures as Justinian in the surviving Roman Empire of the Eastern Mediterranean in the sixth century and Charlemagne in the supposed restoration of a Holy Roman Empire in the West around the year 800 centralized power in ways that threatened to subordinate the witness of the church to the interests of the state.<sup>28</sup> Then there were the Crusades, in which popes and mystics alike rallied knights and commoners from throughout Christendom to push back against Muslim control of the Holy Land. They also launched pogroms against Europe's Jewish communities *en route* and even sacked Christian Byzantium in 1204. Together with the Spanish Inquisition especially, many people both inside and outside the Christian community have now come to view the Crusades as the worst examples of Christians' use of violence. Christian pacifists would simply add that such a phenomenon would be unimaginable without all of the intermediate steps and rationalizations that began with Constantine.

Still, the medieval period itself also offered self-critical counterpoints. Historians debate the extent to which the proliferation of monastic communities throughout this entire period constituted a deliberate protest against the accommodations that other Christians were making to wealth and worldly power. Through the disavowal of wealth and weaponry, however, monks and mendicants kept alive a vision of Christianity's holding true to the gospel model of Jesus and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, intentionally or not. Monastic communities played a leading role in what amounts to a medieval peace movement—the effort to limit internecine violence among European communities by marking certain places or populations as off-limits to fighting (The Peace of God) or by suspending fighting on an increasing number of holy days (The Truce of

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, "In Defense of Constantine," *First Things*, no. 112 (April, 2001), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Thus, Roman Catholics who celebrate Constantine and reject the pejorative use of the term "Constantinianism" express analogous worries about the fusion of church and state when they describe Justinian and Charlemagne as examples of the danger of "Caeseropapism."

God).<sup>29</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi seems quite deliberately to have offered an alternative to the Crusades when he and his brothers travelled to Egypt to visit a Muslim sultan and demonstrate Christ-like love of supposed enemies by living with “the Saracens” at the very time when other Christians were launching the Fifth Crusade.<sup>30</sup> Evidence that the Christian conscience remained uneasy about its accommodation to violence presents itself in penitential practices that kept soldiers who had shed blood, even in a just war, away from eucharistic communion for lengths varying from forty days, to a year, to three successive Lents, to one year for every person killed.<sup>31</sup>

As the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation reconfigured the Christian tradition, advocates for nonviolence reemerged. At the hinge between late-medieval Catholicism and the Reformation, the Catholic humanist Erasmus called Christian princes to a kind of cosmopolitan pacifism. Though he wrote eloquently and influenced many, Erasmus nevertheless founded no church or movement. Such a movement did emerge from the radical wing of the Reformation among the so-called Anabaptists or “re-baptizers,” who voiced a renewed critique of any Christian use of “the sword.” Some of the very earliest Anabaptists did participate in the Peasant’s War of 1525, and in later decades an apocalyptic edge to the movement occasionally erupted in violent ways that discredited its heirs for centuries. However, if anything, those very experiences helped forge the consensus that eventually earned the Anabaptist family of churches—Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites—the title of “historic peace churches.” The other two groups most commonly listed as historic peace churches are the Society of Friends (or Quakers) and the Church of the Brethren (or Dunkards), which emerged in later centuries with at least some influence from the Anabaptists. The most obvious impulse for the Anabaptists’ embrace of

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald G. Musto, *The Catholic Peace Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 71–75.

<sup>30</sup> J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), pp. 4–5, 42–59, and 68–75. Francis may well have hoped to preach and convert the Muslims he encountered, although Hoeberichts sees development in Francis’s thought as he and his brothers actually lived in Muslim communities. Even if that remained his goal, however, by proceeding nonbelligerently through friendship, he offered a witness not only to them but also to crusader Christians.

<sup>31</sup> See Musto, *Catholic Peace Tradition*, pp. 57–59; along with primary source documentation in Ronald G. Musto, *Catholic Peacemakers: A Documentary History*, vol. 1: *From the Bible to the Era of the Crusades*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), pp. 306–309 and 384–390.

nonviolence was their own direct reading of the New Testament, according to a radicalized version of Martin Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*—the authority of the Bible over the pronouncements of any intervening tradition. The social and political context in which they read Christian scripture afresh not only helped shape their reading; it also forged key questions with which Christian pacifists have grappled and debated throughout the modern age.

This was the time when modern nation-states were centralizing power and competing with one another for territory and hegemony, after all, while all kinds of national, economic, and ethnic groups struggled to assert their claims upon justice and maintain their group identities. By severing the tacit bond that had developed in medieval Europe between baptismal and civic identities, the Anabaptists were proposing a polity to sustain group identity that relied on voluntary commitment according to the free exercise of conscience, rather than on the control of territory. Because this polity meant taking their communities back into a kind of diaspora existence, the Anabaptists actually had to address civil authorities and their questions quite regularly—sometimes under interrogation, sometimes through appeals for religious tolerance, and sometimes through direct negotiations. As a result, they also faced regularly the question of whether a principled ethic of nonviolence disqualified Christians from any role in the governance of society at large. Although many Anabaptists agreed that principled nonviolence and participation in government were incompatible, other Anabaptist leaders seem to have held out hope that a prince or magistrate might act as a true Christian. Quakers have been even more optimistic. The entrance of William Penn into their movement afforded them the opportunity for a “Holy Experiment” in nonviolent government. The pacifist son of a British admiral, Penn inherited the land that became the colony and then the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Quakers governed Pennsylvania for seventy years in a period characterized by decades of peaceful relations with the Indians and a policy of religious toleration from which Mennonites and other groups benefited.

The continuing debate among Christian pacifists over how far they can take consistent practices of nonviolence into public realms might largely remain at an impasse were it not for the witness of a Hindu who found inspiration in Jesus and guidance in his Sermon on the Mount, but who rejected Christianity. Famously describing his development of nonviolent

philosophy and strategy as “experiments with truth,” Mahatma Gandhi’s commitment to principled nonviolence led to politically efficacious methods of nonviolent struggle in the first half of the twentieth century, as he sought to win minority rights in South Africa and independence for India. His example thus broke through the impasse between the gospel and politics in ways that Christians are still digesting, for, if principled rejection of violence and principled respect for adversaries actually creates political power instead of withdrawing from it, then no one—Christian or otherwise—may need to choose between sectarian faithfulness and political efficacy at all. It is of course to the Christian community’s shame that it needed a Christ-like Hindu to learn this lesson, both because mainline Christianity had failed to heed the internal critique of nonviolent Christian traditions and because those traditions have sometimes been reticent to extend that critique by developing their practices in politically operative ways.

Thankfully, leaders of diverse Christian traditions have been willing to learn the Gandhian lesson. Two of the most prominent are the African-American Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope John Paul II. King not only brought Gandhian techniques and philosophy into the civil rights struggle of the 1950’s and 1960’s, but he also inspired a succession of antiwar movements and entirely reshaped the political discourse of mainstream Protestant churches. John Paul’s leadership was critical in what seemed unimaginable until the cascading events of 1989, which dismantled the Soviet empire and ended the Cold War. The revolution of 1989 was no doubt a complex phenomenon with many geopolitical causes, but John Paul himself credited the power of active nonviolence above all others.<sup>32</sup> Debates among Christian pacifists and with nonpacifist Christians certainly continue, yet John Paul II demonstrated the impact that historic peace churches and other nonviolent Christians have had on the larger Christian tradition. As the year 2000 approached, the pope saw an opportunity to call all Christians to repentance and proclaimed it a year of Jubilee. Chief among his concerns was that “the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance” to review the “painful

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<sup>32</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* [On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*], encyclical letter (1991), nos. 22–23; also see nos. 5, 25, and 41; available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html).

chapter of history” in which Christians have acquiesced, “especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth.”<sup>33</sup> In a dramatic and unprecedented liturgy at the Vatican on March 12, 2000, the first Sunday of Lent, the pope and leading cardinals—including his eventual successor Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—led prayers asking forgiveness for actions such as the Inquisition, those against the Jewish people, sins against the dignity of women, marginalization of the poor, and the Crusades.

Meanwhile, pacifist Christians have increasingly found themselves collaborating with just-war Christians in recent decades as both have opposed particular wars and militaristic policies. In a striking sign of movement from the just-war direction, Vatican officials such as the future Pope Benedict XVI signaled that “today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war.’”<sup>34</sup> At least three major factors are responsible for a growing convergence between just-war and pacifist Christians. For one thing, the lethality of modern warfare in the twentieth century led many Christians who would otherwise agree that some wars might theoretically be justifiable to ask whether modern wars can ever really meet stringent requirements such as noncombatant immunity. For another, the Gandhian development of politically efficacious nonviolence likewise leads many to ask whether nations must invest far more in civilian-based methods of self-defense before any claim to have met the requirement of last resort can be serious. Finally, one implication of modern participatory democracy is that all citizens share responsibility for their governments’ policies and must have the right to selective conscientious objection when they believe a war or potential war to be unjust, even if they are not absolute pacifists.

Far from requiring Christian pacifists to withhold cooperation from fellow Christians who remain ready to contemplate exceptional circumstances in which warfare might be justifiable, a nonviolence based in Jesus’

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<sup>33</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente* [*As the Third Millennium Draws Near*], apostolic letter (1994), no. 35; available at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19941110\\_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html).

<sup>34</sup>ZENIT News Service, “Cardinal Ratzinger on the Abridged Version of Catechism” (2003); available at <https://zenit.org/articles/cardinal-ratzinger-on-the-abridged-version-of-catechism/>. Also see *Civiltà Cattolica*, “Modern War and the Christian Conscience,” tr. Peter Heinegg, in Jean Bethke Elshtain and David E. DeCosse, eds., *But Was It Just? Reflections on the Morality of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 107–125.



person and teachings should have the resources not only to welcome their help in the common work of peacebuilding but also to invite their perspectives and mutual critique.<sup>35</sup> At its most basic, the impulse that animates Christian nonviolence is Jesus' call to love our neighbors and extend such love even to enemies. Love of needy and vulnerable neighbors must welcome all good-faith efforts to reduce violence, whether down the street or around the world. Furthermore, love of enemy must include vulnerability to the claims—including the truth-claims—of those very “others” with whom we most differ or from whom we are most estranged. A Christian pacifist who is altogether impervious to the arguments and concerns of those working from just-war assumptions is acting more ideologically than nonviolently—as is the Christian who is impervious to the claims of interfaith dialogue partners in dialogue. In other words, the lessons of *intrafaith* dialogue between Christians with divergent perspectives on war and violence loop us back to the task of *interfaith* dialogue. Paradoxically, a Christian nonviolence that begins in the particular narrative of Jesus and the claims he makes upon his followers may actually be more, rather than less, prepared for honest interfaith dialogue—in the present case with Islam—than a theological or philosophical position that thinks it must first construct a supposedly neutral arena of discourse or a supposedly universal framework for dialogue before either may begin.

### Looping Back: Authentic Dialogue as Nonviolence toward the Truth

Perhaps it seemed at first that Christian pacifism would be less accessible to Muslim interlocutors if we grounded its explanation in particular theological convictions that Muslims cannot be expected to share—such as the full divinity of Jesus Christ, as understood through the doctrine of the Trinity, coupled with his Incarnation in human life and history, to the point of vulnerability to a very real death by crucifixion.

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<sup>35</sup> For further examples of convergence, collaboration, and mutual critique between pacifist and just-war Christians, see Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, 1st ed. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998); and Gerald W. Schlabach, ed. and lead author, *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence*, with Drew Christianesen, et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

Many assume that the way to promote peace between religions and civilizations is to minimize our differences in order to highlight our commonalities and identify a few universals upon which all must agree. That assumption marks a family resemblance between otherwise divergent proposals for social and, indeed, global concord. Historically, Stoic and Catholic efforts to identify universal principles of natural law have offered one version. Philosophical liberalism, attempting to construct agreed-upon groundrules for political discourse without relying on metaphysics, has offered another version. Calls to recognize religious diversity as not just a descriptive reality, the unassailable fact of “plurality,” but instead as a normative requirement, “pluralism” precisely as an -ism, offer yet another version. These proposals are not without merit, but they regularly falter insofar as each turns out to constitute yet another tradition, rather than a neutral space that is free of all tradition. Covertly, each requires its own kind of conversion away from other worldviews to its own. Such are the conundrums that may arise whenever we sense such an urgent need for a new polity of tolerance, inclusion, and respect that we become proselytizers ourselves, seeking to convert those who fail to see the glorious light of pluralism while growing intolerant of those intolerant ones whose intransigence prevents them from acknowledging the equal validity of other faiths.

Whether Christian or Gandhian, a nonviolence that offers alternatives to lethal physical struggle also offers a mode of epistemology and discourse capable of transcending the conundrums we face here. Let us call this mode *nonviolence toward the truth*.<sup>36</sup> In Gandhi’s view, willingness to suffer for the truth already offers persuasive evidence of truthfulness, yet nonviolent practitioners also assume their own fallibility and are fully prepared to allow opponents to prove them wrong.<sup>37</sup> For the nonviolent Christian,

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<sup>36</sup> Gerald W. Schlabach, “Augustine’s Hermeneutic of Humility: An Alternative to Moral Imperialism and Moral Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 22 (Fall, 1994): 302, 320, and 322–327. Behind the notion of “nonviolence toward the truth” lie suggestions by John Howard Yoder. Chris K. Huebner has systematically teased out Yoder’s pacifist epistemology in section two of his book, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006). Also see Gerald W. Schlabach, “Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder’s Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology,” a review essay on John Howard Yoder and Michael G. Cartwright, eds., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (April, 1997): 305–309.

<sup>37</sup> Farah Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration,” *The Review of Politics* 68 (Spring, 2006): 287–317. One might also consult Erik H.

additional reasons for such a stance come from trust that God's strength is made perfect in weakness and that we save our lives only by preparing to lose them for Christ and others. Thus, we can also be confident that vulnerability to the truth-claims of others need not threaten but instead will strengthen our groundedness in the truth of God and of God's world. Even a frank proselytism need not be ruled out of court, therefore. The point is not just that the practice of nonviolence may aim for the moral conversion of opponents. Rather, the point is that if our goal is a polity of mutual respect, then nonviolent practitioners should remember that their commitment to aligning ends with means requires them to begin with themselves. They may frankly wish to convince others of their own truth-claims concerning nonviolent respect for all human life, but they will not fully have lived according to such a truth until they have made themselves so vulnerable to the truth-claims of those others that they cannot rule out the possibility that they will be converted instead.

Philosophies of moral relativism and religious pluralism turn out to be surprisingly *disrespectful* in comparison, whenever they merely or even grudgingly tolerate other views, without necessarily requiring themselves to listen hard. After all, relativism or pluralism alone actually tends to trivialize the very claims they claim to respect, for they allow others to say almost anything except that their beliefs are actually true and potentially binding. In any case, a nonviolent mode of epistemology and discourse does not require dialogue partners to construct any new forum for dialogue or to agree to yet another worldview—even a nonviolent one. It simply invites them to begin talking to one another, face to face, as they are, with no preconditions, one conversation at time.<sup>38</sup>

So we can be honest. In our present context—that of Muslim/Christian dialogue in particular, and dialogue among all three Abrahamic religions more generally—we both can and should recognize honestly that the faith and legacy of Abraham may be a source of unity but may also be a

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Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), pp. 412–414.

<sup>38</sup>In addition to the explicitly nonviolent thinkers to whom I make reference in the previous two footnotes, I must cite as deeply influential here the thought of Anglican bishop, ecumenist, and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, above all in his article on the “The Basis, Purpose, and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1977), pp. 253–270.

source of contention. We gather around Abraham in a shared hope of finding common ground, but we nonetheless profess rival Abrahamic narratives. Muslims and Jews have sometimes understood themselves to be contending over whether the promise to Abraham flows primarily through the children of Ishmael or of Isaac. Between Jews and Christians lies a basic contention over whether God raises up new children of Abraham from gentile stones (as John the Baptizer hinted) through faith in Jesus the “Messiah” of Israel or through bloodlines and fidelity to the Mosaic Law. Between Muslims and Christians there is a basic contention over whether the prophetic message revealed through Muhammad now purifies and supersedes even the universal invitation of Christianity by returning to the unalloyed faith of Abraham himself and offering it to all humankind.

Will it help or complicate this rivalry if a Christian pacifist offers a further gloss on Christianity’s own rival Abrahamic narrative?<sup>39</sup> That gloss goes something like this: God’s call to Abraham, at least as we find it in Genesis 12, not only launched the drama of salvation history; it also charted the continuing plot of that drama by structuring a creative tension into it from its foundational beginning. Blessed with a divinely graced calling, Abraham and his children have a heritage of faith to celebrate and an identity to preserve—but they are also expected to be a blessing to all nations thereby. Excruciatingly and paradoxically, this is an identity they can lose by veering in either of two opposite directions—holding tightly to it in an exclusionary siege mentality, or dissipating it by so assimilating that they act little differently than do the nations around them. Much of the drama of the Hebrew scriptures comes, by its own account, as Israel struggles to receive liberation and the land of promise without becoming new oppressors (Deuteronomy 8–9), to find security in a king without forgetting that the Lord God is truly their king (1 Samuel 8 and 12), to preserve their identity in exile while seeking the *shalom* of the city in which they find themselves (Jeremiah 29), and to return as a vulnerable remnant to

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<sup>39</sup>For earlier explorations of the meaning of “Abrahamic community,” see Gerald W. Schlabach, “Beyond Two- Versus One-Kingdom Theology: Abrahamic Community as a Menonite Paradigm for Engagement in Society,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 11 (Fall, 1993): 187–210; idem, *To Bless All Peoples: Serving with Abraham and Jesus*, Peace and Justice Series 12 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991); and idem, “Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?” in Stanley Hauerwas et al., eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 449–471.

the land without either depleting themselves through unguarded interchange with surrounding communities (Ezra and Nehemiah) or diminishing their account of God's greatness through an ethnocentric prejudice that resents God's grace toward other nations (Jonah). Seeing this drama coming to a climax in Isaiah's vision of a faithful servant of the Lord who liberates and brings justice through his own suffering, Christians have concluded that Jesus was not only this servant but has thus reinvigorated God's ancient calling to all Israel.

Thus, the nonviolent cross of Jesus offers a resolution to the creative tension that comes with being blessed to be a blessing, but it also impresses that tension anew upon the life of the people called church. According to a nonviolent, non-Constantinian ecclesiology (or understanding of the church), Jesus has set into motion his new and original politics by seeking to reconstitute Israel as a reconciled and reconciling people or *ummah* of peace. Such a people will live in diaspora among all the nations, offering the blessing of Abraham to every family on earth. If such an account risks anew the old supersessionist triumphalism by which Christians first called themselves the "New Israel," recall that the proposal here is not that we repress the reality of rival Abrahamic narratives but, rather, that we conduct our rivalry in the way of nonviolent service. What is wrong about the triumphalism by which Christians have called themselves the "New Israel" is not so much the claim itself but the failure to accept fully the responsibilities of any such designation. Those responsibilities require all of us to assert our claims to be chosen children of Abraham—not by holding the blessing of Abraham tightly, obnoxiously, or violently to ourselves, but by living out the responsibilities of chosenness as a people for all peoples, blessed to be a blessing, preserving our identity best by placing it at risk. When Islam, in turn, makes supersessionist claims *vis-à-vis* Christianity, nonviolent Christians will not need to respond defensively, but they can invite Muslims to convince them in exactly this way, through arguments embodied in practices of blessing.

In other words, I doubt that the Abrahamic narrative I have just laid out will entirely satisfy rival narrators from the other Abrahamic faiths—but I also doubt that such a thing is necessary. For a healthy discourse between the Abrahamic faiths, we surely do not need a decisive claim as to who are the chosen ones. Neither do we need a covertly intolerant "tolerance" that further alienates rival claimants by disallowing their most deeply

held convictions of chosenness. Rather, we need a clearer recognition that the paradoxical test of chosenness is a track record of living as a blessing to all families of the earth, beginning with service to the other two communities of Abrahamic faith. As the author of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews put it, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (10:24). Similarly, the Qur’ān encourages us that God could have made us all into one community but chose not to do so, “in order that he might test you according to what he has given you; so compete in goodness” (5:48). May we thereby evoke the best of one another’s traditions. A rivalry that competes in this way is not to be avoided but welcomed, in fact, for it will itself be a blessing to all *other* families of the earth.

In sum, if the tradition of Christian pacifism has sought to be a centuries-long embodied critique of Christian accommodation with violence, we may also express the hope that its witness can be a blessing to other families and faiths as well. In the context of interfaith dialogue, Christian pacifists have this proposition to add: While every effort to dialogue our way toward a reduction of global conflict and violence is welcome, a commitment to nonviolence is not so much the goal of our dialogue as it is the beginning we must already have made in order to dialogue at all. Let us then recognize the nonviolent *principio* or starting point that is making dialogue possible and embrace it consistently.

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