Returning to nonresistance

Layton Friesen

> *The entire futility and decay of earthly existence can, as such, be transformed into fruitfulness, if it understands itself as the "pangs" of the new aeon and as a sharing in Christ's sufferings. . . . God assumes that his creature will be at work, even when he reserves to his own sovereign synthesis to determine how the contributions of his creature are applied. The convergence of human achievement and the coming of God as the omega is absolutely incalculable, . . . but this does not make it any less certain.*
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> *–Hans Urs Von Balthasar*[1]

Due largely to Mennonites' encounters with more confident, evangelical, missional, world-changing forms of Christianity in the twentieth century, the old doctrine of nonresistance that Anabaptist churches held for four centuries came under criticism for being too passive and insular and, perhaps most problematically, for seeming to be an *inconsistent* ethic. Assimilating Anabaptists in North America departed from it in two directions; some translated it into active relief work, peacemaking, and social justice activism; others, often more evangelical Mennonites, drifted from pacifism completely.[2] But something was left behind in both cases, and I am not convinced either of these departures is content to be "the 'pangs' of the new aeon and as a sharing in Christ's sufferings" that Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar mentions in the quote above.

I was taught nonresistance by my late father, Harry Friesen, and my early professors at Steinbach Bible College. By then it had been inflected by Harold Bender and his heirs in "The Anabaptist Vision," but its root (in my father's case) was Kleine Gemeinde *Gelassenheit* spirituality of nineteenth-century Russian Mennonite life. For the most part, this older nonresistance was lived out by both Dutch/Russian and Swiss/American

1 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: The New Covenant*, ed. John Riches, trans. Brian McNeil (Ignatius, 1989), 519.

2 Two good books on these changes are Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Herald, 1994).

Mennonites until the twentieth century and still holds among Hutterite, Amish, and conservative Mennonite groups. The farther I sojourn from the day of my father's death, the more his spirituality intrigues me.

The logic of nonresistance

I will not provide an historical description of the shape of nonresistance but will rather describe what I see as its inner spiritual and dogmatic logic. It had its nuances and internal disagreements among adherents, but the basic form I want to hold up here can be stated quite simply as the refusal of the church to kill, with the recognition that God has given the sword to the state to punish evil and maintain order. Or, in short, as imitators of Christ, we won't kill, but at times the state probably should.

This view is predicated on the assumption that God works in providentially complex ways to bring about God's will in the world. On the one hand, God has given a specific mission to the church to call humanity to salvation. The church witnesses to Christ's refusal to defend himself on the day of our atonement; "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The church obeys Christ's severe commands to forgo revenge. Because of this specific mission, the church must be defenseless and walk in the world only with the meekness, love, and forgiveness of Jesus.

On the other hand—and this is where *Gelassenheit* comes in—it is not clear how the defenselessness of the church will be used by God to accomplish God's final victory in the world. A cloud of mystery lingers between our defenselessness and God's final glory in the world. The church gestures toward the Kingdom of Heaven but cannot plot a map to get from here to there. This mystery is navigated only by *Gelassenheit*, the daily, obedient, prayerful surrender of the soul to the obscure goodness of God's providence.

But the church is not all God is doing in this world. God's providence is a vast, nontrackable mystery and includes some use of the state's sword for God's own purposes. Though the state's violence is part of the kingdom of this world, which God is ultimately set against, for now the state's violence is "ordained" by God in a more shadowy mission to bring God's judgement on evil. The state's sword is not necessarily mistaken or against God's will per se, even if it is forbidden to Christians. This view is accompanied by the assumption that, in God's vengeance, God has willed the death of some people. God can use the state to carry out judgement if God wants to. But the state is not a straightforward holy servant in the

hand of God, as it appeared to the Puritan, Dutch Reformed, or Russian Orthodox neighbors of Anabaptists through the centuries.

The consequence of this is a position that seems odd to many today; nonresistance is radically nonviolent but not necessarily anti-military, anti-war, or anti-police. It is against Christians' involvement in these activities but does not extrapolate that into a consistent, universal call for disarmament. Those who adhere to nonresistance can call the police when needed and thank God for the state's protection.[3] What is clear is that no Christian may kill.

Both the nonviolent mission of the church and the violent mission of the state are immersed in the providence of God's judgement and guidance of the world. Both are used in some unexplainable way in the larger purposes of God's reckoning with evil and Satan.

Evaluating nonresistance

What can be said in defense of this older nonresistance? Here we get into controverted territory, but it seems to me this nonresistance has an unexplained gap exactly where the New Testament does. On the one hand, the New Testament has a bold ethic of meekness, love, nonretaliation, and forgiveness to offer disciples. Centuries of spiritualizing, privatizing, futurizing, clericalizing, or problematizing this nonviolent love of Jesus have not finally succeeded in dulling the vision; Jesus and the apostles really did expect Christians to live like this, always and everywhere.

On the other hand, there seems to be a gap, an unexplained difference, between this ethic of Christ and the New Testament's expectations of the state. The New Testament offers little criticism of the government's use of the sword to punish evil. The state (like other principalities) was defeated by the crucified Christ, and Jesus is King of kings; but there is no suggestion that the state will now be *Christian.*[4]

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3 The Dordrecht Confession of 1632, one of the most widely used confessions in the Anabaptist tradition, is effusive in its honor of the state's duty before God to punish evil, protect the good, and "provide good regulations and policies in cities and countries." Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660* (Pandora, 2006), 303. The Prussian Confession of 1660, which is the fount of many later Russian Mennonite confessions, is equally positive in its view of the state's coercion; "Where there is government it is ordained of God; whoever opposes government strives against God's order." Koop, *Confessions*, 324. Both confessions are equally severe in forbidding Christians to exact their own revenge.

4 The passages are familiar: Matt. 5:21–26, 38–48; Luke 6:27–36; Rom. 12:14–21; 1 Pet. 2:21–24; 3:9, 15–19. For expectations about the state's sword, see Luke 3:14; Acts

The absence of a consistent, universal New Testament ethic harmonizing the church and state is felt in Romans 12:17–13:14. Christians—taking no revenge, feeding enemies, overcoming evil with good, and leaving room for God's wrath—are subjects of a state that is God's "agent of wrath" bringing punishment on the wrongdoer with the "sword."

The fact that both the old nonresistance and the New Testament find this gap unremarkable makes me think our forebears deserve respect. They seemed to have a doggedness about obedience to Jesus that recognized limits to their righteousness. Christ had forbidden me to do something he was asking another to do. This was not moral relativism or postmodern sentiment about living with uncertainty and contradiction; rather, it was a worldwise observation that my righteousness is not finally vindicated by amping itself to be extreme enough, total enough, or universal enough to bring about God's purposes in the world. We are little people who refuse to do evil that good might come, but we do not claim that our righteousness—real and concrete though it is—adds up to the Kingdom of God on earth.

At its best, this doctrine is a humble adoration before the vision of Jesus.

At its best, this doctrine is a humble adoration before the vision of Jesus. Christ's divine splendor and power will finally remake the world into New Creation, where the lion will lie with the lamb, but in the present this vision over-awes us, and we cannot match it. Our ethical responses to the glory of Christ are at best a widow's mite. God gave the saints small symbolic acts of peace, friendship, forgiveness, and truth-telling that they are assured will one day find fulfillment in the Kingdom of Heaven, "but from a distance they saw and greeted them" (Heb. 12:13).

This old nonresistance is susceptible to valid criticisms. The most convincing is that its different claims about the church and the state are incoherent. Mid-twentieth century, Mennonites "discovered" the truth that Christ was not only Lord of the church but also Lord of the whole earth.[5] If Christ is King of kings, should we not envision his "politics" and hold it before kings? Should we not then proclaim that the God of the Sermon on the Mount is opposed to every military exercise or coercive use of police power? And was it not obvious that the need to regularly secure government *privilegia* exempting Mennonites from military service

10:1, 33–43; 23:12–24; Rom. 13:1–7; 2 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 2:13–17.

5 This paradigm shift is described in Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties*, 197–204.

tempted them to withhold judgement from governments who extended favours?

A confident, public pacifism emerged that sought to show the world a viable alternative of peacemaking, restorative justice, and a creative rethinking of how even secular governments might become agents of peace. Rather than staying in the church, this ethic would speak out to the world and be a consistent ethic.

It cannot be denied that nonresistance put Mennonites in an awkward position at times.

A second, related accusation against old nonresistance is that it fosters an insular, privatistic, even inbred church. The *Stille im Lande* became a derisive label, stating what everyone knew they no longer want to be. How were Christians to plant new churches, send out missionaries, and evangelize the world while harboring an ethic that seems to consign the church to isolated rural life in ethnic enclaves? This older doctrine seemed unfit for the new gospel confidence that was needed to establish institutions like MCC and foreign mission boards.

It cannot be denied that nonresistance put Mennonites in an awkward position at times. Mennonites were those who stayed ensconced on farms or conscientious objector camps refusing to do the "dirty work" while their neighbors were off in Europe dying for our freedoms. This embarrassment faded for Mennonites as they either gave up on nonviolence altogether or adopted a more anti-war stance and engaged in active nonviolent resistance to oppose or intervene in conflict. Mennonites could become like other draft-resisters and anti-war activists who just thought this present war was unwise or unjust.

But there were answers for all of this, even if our current theological systems don't imagine them. They were rooted in ecclesiology. What this older doctrine assumed was that the church was a special, heroic mission within God's campaign to defeat sin. This special mission required that the church be recused from killing, even if it had to be done by someone. For the short-term, God was propping up the state and its weaponry to maintain a baseline order in the world. Mutually assured bloodshed did keep a lid on chaos. However, this cycle of violence and counter-violence had no hope. It could not finally point to the coming age of light promised in the resurrection of Jesus. Only God could bring that about, and *somebody* had to testify to that final healing, *somebody* had to live as a symbolic, evangelistic image showing the world where salvation lay and what

salvation would finally look like. In the present age, this missional recusal of the church looked foolish and irresponsible. But, as the logic held, this is precisely the role for followers of Jesus.

It is also the case that the new peacemaking, social activist, missionary "politics of Jesus" has its own problems, especially when polarized beside the evangelical Mennonite tendency to reject nonviolent ethics altogether. These two flights from nonresistance have long ago sorted themselves into the familiar left/right ideology of the West. An ideology is a humanly achievable program splintered from the full catholic gospel of Christ. It's a human construct with no need for the saving work of Christ to produce its virtue. Neither left- nor right-wing Mennonites have ended up with ethics that depend on the baptism of the Holy Spirit to actualize. What can be said about the old nonresistance is that because its worldly aims were so modest, to be coherent it depended structurally on the resurrection of Jesus for vindication. That's not nothing. It wagered that God would one day draw an un-anticipatable line from Christian obedience to the Kingdom of Heaven, but until then we live like fools.

In addition to serious criticisms of nonresistance, there are also stereotypes and historical contingencies that are not a necessary part of its theological vision. For example, while nonresistance does not require condemning every military action, neither does it require blessing each one. There is nothing within its theology, in my view, that prevents its proponents from protesting tyranny and greedy conquest. Just because a disciple recuses herself from killing does not mean she has to stay silent when injustice festers. Just because God uses some of the state's violence for God's own end of punishing evil does not mean all state violence has to be tolerated.

A new nonresistance could develop a theology and ethic of war.

In this sense, a new nonresistance could develop a theology and ethic of war. I see a large common ground between the old nonresistance and the just war tradition, not in determining when *Christians* can kill but in determining when the *state* might kill. The just war tradition was developed to chasten the state's irresistible temptation to use the sword for unjust ends. That harmonizes quite nicely with the 1527 Schleitheim Confession or the 1632 Dordrecht Confession of Faith; the sword was given by God to punish evil—nothing more. Nonresistant Christians who believe that the state is "the servant of God to execute wrath on the evil-doer" can confidently speak truth to power.

Further, there is nothing inherent in nonresistance as such that requires the church be insular, withdrawn, and uninvolved in evangelism, advocacy for the poor, church planting, and relief work across religious and cultural boundaries. It is true that our ancestors did little of this beyond mutual aid until awakened by evangelical piety in the late-nineteenth century. However, in this present secular age it is important to emphasize that this work should be fueled at both the institutional and personal level by the inner furnace of baptism, prayer, worship, doctrine, preaching, and community life–sharing in the local church. Nonresistant disciples can work with many who don't kneel beside them in church, but there should be no doubt that their love is virtuous gold refined in the fire of Christ's atonement.

Conclusion

I don't know whether the old doctrine of nonresistance can be reinhabited. It will never again exist in the socio-political milieu where it found its home in nineteenth-century Russia or Pennsylvania, or even 1930s Steinbach. But the basic contours of its dogma, the inner life of its *Gelassenheit*, the contentedness of its modest righteousness within the great providential rule of God—this remains an intriguing option for any church committed to Christ's peace. When war threatens, peace churches often stammer to explain how, on their terms, this present evil can be contained. I admit I stammer when that question arises. After the limited capacity of the state for honest diplomacy, mediation, and patience has been exhausted by the sheer tenacity of evil, God does hand the state a sword. Even those who imitate Christ in nonviolent love will need some theo-ethical explanation for why the state may need to kill, though we cannot hold the hilt ourselves. The old doctrine of nonresistance deserves to be respected in that account. It still has the capacity to include much that has been learned in the last century about peacemaking while acknowledging a greater dependence on the providence of God to finally win creation back to its maker.

About the author

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