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## War and peace



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# Editorial

Karl Koop

We live in a world where military conflicts seem to be intensifying. After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, there was much optimism that the world had become a safer place, but since then wars have been on the rise—with an increasing number of soldiers and civilians dying and millions of people experiencing loss of home and necessities of life. In looking to the future, it seems that the best that we can hope for is to muddle through and try to avoid the worst of catastrophes.

**Do Mennonites have new insights about what it means to work for peace, both at home and abroad?**

Christians have frequently insisted that war is terrible and wrong but have often pointed out that it may be a necessary evil and that under certain conditions it is justifiable. Anabaptists, along with other peace churches, have countered, arguing that all of life is sacred, and, because of the incarnation, cross, and resurrection, war is always wrong. Christians must practice nonresistance and work actively toward building peace. The Christian life is about following Jesus, imitating Christ, living a life of discipleship, and holding firm to Jesus's teachings and example—the one who called on his followers to not resist evil (Matthew 5:39).

Peace traditions have not always been clear about what a peace witness entails, and since the mid-twentieth century attitudes in some Mennonite circles have evolved. There has been a shift away from an ethic of quiet nonresistance toward an emphasis on engagement with the world and a commitment to active peacebuilding that includes resisting evil while maintaining an ethic of nonviolence.

In recent times, Mennonites have begun to deal with violence closer at hand and have sought to address issues related to racism, domestic violence, and sexual abuse in the context of work, school, church, and home. Considering these issues and the conversations that have ensued, the question arises: Do Mennonites have new insights about what it means to work for peace, both at home and abroad? A few of the articles in this issue begin to shed light on this question.

The issue opens with a contribution by Paul Doerksen who addresses the awkwardness of being a pacifist. He notes the various challenges of holding a minority position but nevertheless feels called to trust the vision displayed in the Bible—a vision of peace that God will one day bring to reality.

Yet what happens when we encounter passages that seem to contradict this vision? Five biblical scholars—Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, Sunder John Boopalan, Derek Suderman, Mary Schertz, and Alicia Batten—bravely tackle violent texts in the Bible and tell us how they come to terms with these passages. Layton Friesen's essay that follows offers an additional perspective by suggesting that the doctrine of nonresistance that Anabaptists have held for centuries may point the way forward, recognizing the importance of Christ's peace within "the great providential rule of God" that includes acts of justice and judgment.

From here, the issue offers various perspectives on the practices of peacebuilding. Esther Epp-Tiessen shares epiphanies from her journey with Mennonite Central Committee and identifies new insights and challenges. Janna Hunter-Bowman examines the experiences of women peacebuilders in Columbia, which suggest that peace workers need to take seriously power dynamics in situations of conflict. Rose Marie Berger, a founding member of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and senior editor at *Sojourners* magazine, writes about recent Roman Catholic affirmations of nonviolence—an implicit reminder that the Roman Catholic Church also has a peace tradition. Jonny Rashid addresses the highly conflicted region of Israel-Palestine to reflect on the implications of whether and how to take sides in the conflict, considering that both parties in the conflict have experienced horrific oppression. Andrea Cramer founded a post-resettlement nonprofit and shares some of her varied and illuminating experiences with refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing the violence of war.

The final contributions take a more meditative turn. Kevin Derksen offers a sermon for Peace Sunday, drawing on Acts 15 and Ephesians 2 while reflecting on hostages and the living hell that war emanates. Anneli Loepp Thiessen and Ingrid Loepp Thiessen reflect on a funeral experience interwoven with thoughts on the hymn "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" (So take my hands) that has accompanied a segment of the Mennonite experience affected by intergenerational trauma. Julian Waldner contemplates our most basic need—to come home—and finds it in the

work of joy and in the here and now. Carol Penner closes by offering prayers for a church and world that longs for peace.

What does Christian hope look like, and from where does it come? In this season of precarious uncertainty, I am reminded of Henri Nouwen's reference to hope's grounding:

> *Important for me is not if our civilization will survive or not but if we can continue to live with hope, and I really think we can because our Lord has given us His promise that He will stay with us at all times. He is the God of the living, He has overcome evil and death and His love is stronger than any form of death and destruction. That is why I feel that we should continually avoid the temptation of despair and deepen our awareness that God is present in the midst of all the chaos that surrounds us and that that presence allows us to live joyfully and peacefully in a world so filled with sorrow and conflict.*[1]

May it be so.

## About the author

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1 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life*, edited with a preface by Gabrielle Earnshaw (Convergent, 2016), 45.

# The awkwardness of being a pacifist

Paul Doerksen

Trying to be a faithful pacifist puts me in awkward situations and conversations. I know that feeling awkward is not among the most important dimensions that surround issues of violence, war, and peace. Nonetheless, it's difficult to articulate pacifist ideals in certain contexts such as discussions that seek to determine what might be done in volatile situations in which it appears that deployment of military measures might make sense. Negatively described, pacifism is a belief that violence should not be used; positively, it is the belief that peace should be pursued using peaceful methods. Many different versions of this view exist, and the one to which I cling is part of my Christian faith. I believe that in the person, work, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus we find the example of and the direction for pacifism, as well as the strength to live in peaceful ways, especially as part of the body of Christ, the church.

## The awkwardness of Remembrance Day

Because I embrace Christian pacifism, I find Remembrance Day rather awkward—that is, I don't quite know what to do when it comes around each year. Many people buy and wear red poppies, which function as a symbol, drawing on the image of the famous poem "In Flanders Fields," especially the immortal line, "In Flanders fields the poppies grow between the crosses row on row." The wearing of the poppy serves as a way of remembering the sacrifice of millions of soldiers—in the form of death, injury, giving of years of service, and so on—and a commitment to remember the kinds of values that were being fought for: democracy, freedom, resistance to tyranny, and so on. As a way of remembering all those things and more, many have taken to wearing poppies, and some years I have simply joined in and worn one as well.

But I'm not quite comfortable doing so, I must admit. Part of the reason for my discomfort is the role of war within the story that is part of wearing a poppy—which, to be clear, is not a straightforward glorification of war. It's important, I think, to acknowledge and commemorate the depth of sacrifice given by those who died and those who survived. Further, I want to acknowledge that the purpose of war is in some ways the same as pacifism's goal—that is, the purpose is peace, the end of war.

After all, Woodrow Wilson, the American president during World War I, argued that that war was the "war to end all wars." So, ironically perhaps, soldiers and pacifists share similar purposes. I ask myself, why not wear the poppy? Yet, the story represented by the poppy, insofar as I understand it, is not a story that I embrace in its entirety.

Sometimes I've worn a pin that displays the slogan, "To remember is to work for peace." I like the message but am keenly aware that some people find it just a bit condescending, as if those who went to war weren't doing exactly that, as if we know better, and so on. But I have worn that button sometimes.

And, just to show how inconsistent I am, I've sometimes worn both at once—thus sending mixed messages, no doubt—but on purpose. And then, sometimes, I don't wear either one because I don't quite know what to do with all of this.

To address this awkwardness head on, below I describe my belief and offer it as something to be considered. I do not take up every argument or try to show how wrong others are. Rather, I offer this description of pacifism as a kind of personal testimony. Above I offered a negative and positive definition of pacifism. Here I give this basic description more shape and content so that it doesn't remain so amorphous. I'll begin this process negatively by saying what pacifism is *not*.

## What pacifism is not

First, pacifism is not the same as being *passive*. The two words sound similar, but that similarity is misleading. Pacifism does not call you to stand around with your hands in your pockets while all around people are being beat up, shot, robbed, kicked, punched, slapped, whipped, and so on. Pacifists want to be *active* but in ways that are nonviolent, which signals an important difference from a passive stance. For the pacifist, peace is not a complete lack of tension or conflict, like some soft summer evening at the lake with the surface of the water as smooth as glass. The pursuit of peace itself may bring a certain kind of conflict and tension; pacifism is not tranquility at all costs. The absence of tension or conflict in a given situation does not necessarily mean that there you find peace; it might simply indicate the ignoring of real issues. At any rate, I offer up for your consideration the life of Jesus Christ; for a peaceful person, he sure created a lot of trouble—but it was trouble of a certain kind.

Second, pacifism is not something embraced by people who are simply nonviolent by nature. I haven't embraced this view because of how

peaceful I am already. Quite the opposite, I have all kinds of practices, reactions, propensities, leanings, actions, and attitudes that are more violent than not. To clarify, I haven't killed anyone—but there are many other ways of being violent than murdering. You might say that I embrace pacifism in part as a way of addressing my tendencies. So, if someone were to say to me, "You claim to be a pacifist, but you are inconsistent," I would simply agree. I'm a pacifist not because I'm already peaceful but because I want to shape my life in that way.

Third, pacifism is not a quick, easy answer to complicated problems in our world. My embrace of pacifism does not mean that I know what to do in complicated situations where it seems that something must be done. I struggle with many questions to which I don't have clear answers: What about personal self-defense? What if someone is attacking my loved ones? What can and should be done about a tyrant like Hitler? Put a different way, the embrace of pacifism is far from a guarantee of success in any given situation. It's not as though a difficult scenario arises where people who allow for the use of force in certain situations can't fix things and along comes pacifism to the rescue with the solution to the problem that would otherwise remain insoluble.

## What pacifism is

Having described what pacifism is *not*, I turn now to what it *is*. First, pacifism is part of the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ—or at least the version of pacifism that I embrace finds its genesis, its source, and its shape in Jesus Christ. In other words, I am not a generic pacifist; I'm a Christian, and intrinsic to that faith, I believe, is the pursuit of peace in peaceful ways. This is not to suggest that anyone who does not embrace this view is not a *real* Christian, a real follower of Jesus. Truth be told, I'm keenly aware that the view I'm putting forward is a minority Christian understanding. Far more Christians across history have embraced what is known as the just war tradition than those who have embraced pacifism—and the same holds true for Christians around the globe at this moment. Most Christians believe that under certain circumstances it is legitimate and maybe even required to temporarily embrace violence, and many in that majority of Christians are also engaged in attempting to follow Jesus Christ in a life of discipleship. My point is not to say that anyone who is not a pacifist is not a Christian. Rather, my point here is that I'm a Christian, and, as I understand it, part of being a Christian is to be peaceful. To put this in another way, if the Bible did not give an account of the faith in the way

it does, I would not embrace this view. But I read the Bible as teaching us about Jesus in a certain way—that is, Jesus came to earth to display to the world what God is like—and so I don't depend just on a couple verses such as "turn the other cheek" to undergird my pacifist beliefs. Rather, it seems to me that when looking at what the Bible shows us about the kind of being Jesus is—the kind of life he led, the things he taught, the way he embodied peaceful responses to violence, his death, his resurrection, his establishing of the church, his promised return—when I look at all of this, I have been led to believe that to follow such a person, I am invited to embrace peace.

**The pursuit of peace is something that calls for a way of living in the world in all areas of our lives, and at all stages of life, and not just when faced with the question of war.**

Second, pacifism is more than being anti-war. I would argue that war is wrong, but that view is not unique to pacifists. Some people who start wars—and many who fight in them—are against war in general but see particular wars as tragic exceptions. But beyond that, the pursuit of peace is something that calls for a way of living in the world in all areas of our lives, and at all stages of life, and not just when faced with the question of war. In other words, it is not enough for me to say that I will never go to war. At my stage in life, that's not saying much. I'm too old to fight, and besides, I would be bad at it since I have no fighting skills and don't know how to use most weapons. And yet, pursuing peaceful paths in my life is nonetheless challenging. I think about questions such as these: What does it mean for me to teach peaceably? How can I be a peaceful dad? How can I contribute to a culture that celebrates peace more than violence when I'm fully aware that violence is more interesting? How can I pursue real and important disagreements with people but in peaceful ways? It would be a lot easier if being a pacifist was only about resisting war. But to try to live pacifism out in all the dimensions of life—that's complicated.

And so I conclude with another assertion: Pacifism is humanly impossible. By this I mean that I'm under no illusion that by my pursuit of peace means that peace will somehow finally carry the day. To assume that would not only be naïve; it would also show a deep misunderstanding of Christian pacifism. True peace will only come when God brings it to pass. To say otherwise would be to display the kind of arrogance that borders on idolatry, in my view. It is a lack of faith that claims "peace, peace"

when there is no peace; it is a lack of faith that thinks peace is a human construction.

In the end, whatever the truth and validity of my embrace of pacifism amounts to, I am called to trust that the vision displayed in the Bible, as seen by the prophet Isaiah, who claims that God

> *shall judge between the nations*
> *and shall arbitrate for many peoples;*
> *they shall beat their swords into plowshares*
> *and their spears into pruning hooks;*
> *nation shall not lift up sword against nation;*
> *neither shall they learn war any more. (2:4)*

That vision is God's, both in content and in the task of bringing it to reality. Someday, then—in a time that is God's alone and in a way that God will bring to pass—we will work together in peace, and Remembrance Day will no longer be awkward for me. More important, God will rid the world of violence, thanks be to God. May God help us live in peace until that day, insofar as God gives us grace. And may the peace of Christ be with us all.

## About the author

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# Difficult texts

## Grappling with violence in scripture

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, Sunder John Boopalan, Derek Suderman, Mary H. Schertz, and Alicia J. Batten

*Editor's note:* Christians who take seriously the words of Jesus about loving enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36) and Paul's exhortation to live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:14–21) will struggle with passages in the Bible that appear to justify violence. What do we do with difficult scripture passages? We asked biblical scholars to tell us how they come to terms with troublesome texts.

## Psalm 109: A Psalm of imprecation

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe

When the Psalms are used in Christian worship services, they are used primarily in the context of praise and thanksgiving, although psalms of penitence and petition are also often read. The psalms of imprecation or "cursing psalms" rarely appear in Christian worship services. A psalm beloved by many is Psalm 139, a beautiful prayer to God who knows us intimately and will never forsake us. Almost always, though, the reading of this Psalm ends with verse 18, omitting the last six verses. This is because verse 19 continues with these jarring words:

> *O that you would kill the wicked, O God,*
> *and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me. . . .*
> *Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?*
> *And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

Equally disturbing are the final words of Psalm 137: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

Such expressions of vengeance appear in many psalms, but there are nine where the focus is almost entirely on imprecation (Psalms 7, 35, 58,

59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140). Of these, Psalm 109 is perhaps the most vehement and vindictive.

The imprecatory psalms could be considered a type of lament psalm, for they are expressions of deep anger and sorrow about suffering experienced by an individual or a community. In these psalms, the speaker rages against those who have harmed him and his people, and he cries out to God for vengeance against the enemy. The psalmist uses harsh and bitter language to characterize his antagonist. In Psalm 109 the foes are said to have "wicked and deceitful mouths," "lying tongues," and "hateful words." Elsewhere the foes are called "bloodthirsty," "violent," "persecutors," "taunters and revilers," and so on. In Psalm 109 the psalmist laments that his enemies have returned his love and good deeds with hatred and evil.

**These psalms vividly embody a common human experience—that of anger, even rage, against suffering and injustice.**

And so, out of this experience of suffering, trauma, and marginalization, the Psalmist cries out to God for vengeance. He curses his enemies and prays that God will make them suffer like he has suffered. The imagery in Psalm 109:18–19 is striking, as the Psalmist pleads for God's curse to wrap itself around his opponent like a cloak and for it to soak into his body like poisonous oil. Also remarkable is how often the enemy's family is mentioned, as if to amplify the ripple effects of the harm that the psalmist wishes on his foe—for example: "May his children be orphans and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit" (vv. 9–10). It is not just the wrongdoer who is supposed to feel the heat of God's judgment but also his entire family.

Followers of Jesus, who take seriously Jesus's words to love their enemies, struggle to make sense of these challenging texts and violent words. The following three insights can be helpful for understanding the imprecatory psalms.[1] First, these psalms vividly embody a common human experience—that of anger, even rage, against suffering and injustice. Many Christians—and certainly many Mennonites—feel discomfort with the raw honesty and intense anger in these psalms. In our history Mennonites have been known as "the quiet in the land," and our commitment to

1 Here I am drawing on the work of James H. Waltner, *Psalms*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald, 2006).

peace and nonviolence has resulted in the avoidance of conflict, sometimes to the detriment of right relationships. How dare the psalmist say such things out loud to the holy and loving God! Even if one feels such things, one should surely keep them stuffed inside. The psalms of imprecation, however, model that human beings can bring their whole selves to God, that we can with honesty and candor express our anger and pain and even hatred of others to God. It is a way of releasing those strong emotions and entrusting them to the Creator who can handle them. As James Waltner writes in his commentary on the Psalms, "The prayer out of hatred that says, 'I am fed up,' can be a first step in relinquishing that hatred to God. Pouring out bitterness and hurt can be the beginning of healing."[2]

Second, the strong emotions in the imprecatory psalms are there because the speaker is the victim of injustice. In Psalm 109 the word "needy" or phrase "poor and needy" appears three times. Verse 16 states that the enemy "did not remember to show kindness [Hebrew *chesed*] but pursued the poor and needy and the broken-hearted to their death." The psalmist writes, "For I am poor and needy and my heart is pierced within me" (v. 22). He is not only venting his emotions but calling out to God, who "stands at the right hand of the needy to save them from those who would condemn them to death" (v. 31). The imprecatory psalms are the cries "for justice by oppressed and powerless people."[3] In contrast to the enemy, God does show *chesed*, or steadfast love, by delivering the oppressed and raising up the poor. The language of prayer thus becomes an instrument of liberation for those who suffer from injustice. These psalms are expressions of faith in God and trust that God's righteousness and desire for shalom *must* prevail.

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Third, it is important to note that the imprecatory psalms are not *acts* of vengeance but *desire* for vengeance. To be sure, speech can wound and be violent. But, notes Waltner, "in the psalms, the speech of vengeance is characteristically offered to God, not directly to the enemy."[4] Psalm 109 begins, "Do not be silent, O God of my praise," and verse 21 says, "But

2 Waltner, *Psalms*, 756.

3 Waltner, *Psalms*, 755.

4 Waltner, *Psalms*, 755.

you, O Lord my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake." The psalms of imprecation recognize that injustice against God's creatures is an injustice against God and God's moral order, and they call on *God* to do something about it. They are bold acts of faith that relinquish to God the deep pain and rage caused by injustice; they relinquish the right to enact violence against the enemy and leave vengeance where it belongs—in the hands of God (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19).

## Psalm 137: Finding room for human emotion

Sunder John Boopalan

The psalms offer us an image of God that portrays God as one who keeps track of human sorrow and tenderly collects our tears in a bottle (56:8). They invite us to take stock of what it means to have faith in a God who invites human emotion—so much so that liturgical space is made even for the kind of language we find in Psalm 137.

Psalm 137 does not mince its words. The Jewish people find themselves in exile, in the hands of their Babylonian oppressors, who are taunting them to sing a song during a time of extreme suffering. And they do: "Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (vv. 8–9)

Contrary to the notion that the text promotes violence, what it represents is the fact that God allows for the expression of the full range of human emotions—not just positive ones. Positive emotions can, do, and should have a place in individual and congregational life. I wonder, however, if congregations are terrified of the emotion captured in Psalm 137. I further wonder if such unease is part of a larger insufficiently articulated Christian anxiety over negative feelings associated with suffering loss and harm. Let me give an example.

My mother died on August 13, 2024. I was and am still heartbroken. After my return to regular university teaching, a colleague reached out to have a coffee chat and expressed their condolences to me. After a few minutes into the conversation, they asked me a question that, to put it mildly, irritated me: "What brings you *joy* these days?"

Did I, as a good Christian, have to describe my "joy" during my time of mourning? My interlocutor had a point of view that lament had to

somehow be sandwiched between praise. I wondered if God, the creator of the universe, could not handle human sorrow as a legitimate existential state. In this context, Psalm 137 is interesting because the writer of the Psalm does not feel a burden to end the Psalm with a note of praise. There is no notion here that lament had to be somehow sandwiched between praise. The words are raw as are the emotions.

Can pious religious people express *that much* anger and emotion? Yes, and that can be terrifying. As we read psalms like Psalm 137, we encounter intense lament as a legitimate category of creaturely encounter with God.

**Psalm 137 is interesting because the writer of the Psalm does not feel a burden to end the Psalm with a note of praise.**

In his insightful essay "Singing a Subversive Song," Rodney S. Sadler Jr. shares various instances of how imprecation gives voice to peoples experiencing various forms of harm and injustice. Cuban exile Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz finds in Psalm 137 words to expresses her feelings toward those who forced her exile. From the Nigerian context, David Adamo highlights how, instead of seeing Psalm 137 as representation of violence, it is seen as a "protective Psalm." Samuel Murrell, representing the Rastafarian worldview, argues that Psalm 137 allows for a full description of the horrors of slavery and the desire of those in the African Diaspora to "chant down Babylon." And Brad Braxton, referring to the experience of African Americans, argues that Psalm 137 is helpful to understand "the rage" that experiences of political and economic slavery "produce within us."[5]

"Making sense of loss and pain," writes John J. Ahn, "transcends class distinctions and cultures separated by time and geography."[6] Loss can bring people closer to each other's lives and worlds. Sadler's examples are evidence of such a connection. In a world that is filled with so many instances of extraordinary injustice, I have hope that expressing intense emotion in God's presence might bring me closer to others' sorrows and

5 Rodney S. Sadler Jr., "Singing a Subversive Song: Psalm 137 and 'Colored Pompey,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2014), 449–50.

6 John J. Ahn, "Rising from Generation to Generation: Lament, Hope, Consciousness, Home, and Dream," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2014), 464.

wounds. After all, I do believe in a God whose final act involves moving close to people's pain and wiping "every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4).

## Weeping alongside Nahum: An empathetic approach to a violent book

Derek Suderman

We often gravitate toward certain biblical passages and have an aversion to others. As Mennonites, we may be especially prone to focus on "peace passages," while sidelining or functionally dismissing biblical passages that seem in tension with Jesus's call to be peacemakers.

Little wonder that Nahum's strident language and unsettling depiction of God don't garner much attention. We may struggle to make it past the first couple of verses:

> *An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.*
> *A jealous and avenging God is the LORD,*
> *the LORD is avenging and wrathful;*
> *the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries*
> *and rages against his enemies.*

While we may be tempted to dismiss such an understanding, we are faced with a dilemma when we hold Nahum alongside another familiar passage:

> *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)*

Where appeals to this passage often appear in abstract debates between theological "conservatives" and "liberals," its implication is more basic—and challenging. If "all scripture is inspired by God" *and* Nahum is part of our scripture, then we are not easily left off the hook. Rather than defending this book, on the one hand, or arguing against it, on the other, we are left with a basic question: How might Nahum be *useful*? How could it enhance our teaching, correct our perspective, and even train us

in discipleship? How might this brief and largely unknown cul-de-sac in Scripture provide a window into the gospel? Can it?[7]

Reading the book of Nahum, I see the indelible marks of trauma. The devasting experience of being victimized by an oppressive and horrifically violent Assyrian empire raised excruciating questions: How can we believe in an Almighty God in the face of such horrific abuse and violence? Will these "evildoers" get away with it? Doesn't God even care?

Tragically, these visceral questions are also faced by untold millions in our own day as well. Contemporary and well-publicized horrors in Gaza and Ukraine join with long-standing conflicts in South Sudan, the Congo, Myanmar, Colombia, and elsewhere that receive scant attention.

While there is no ancient monopoly on suffering, for some of us it feels a world away. I would suggest that Nahum may be useful for us as followers of Jesus precisely because it may help to *puncture this insulation* from suffering. Reading Nahum as trauma literature can push us beyond abstract philosophical arguments, challenging us instead to provide an empathetic ear to those who have suffered under horrific circumstances both in biblical times and in our contemporary world.[8]

During a learning tour to Israel and Palestine several years ago, our group met a Palestinian NGO worker in the West Bank, whose words still ring in my ears: "No one here suffers from PTSD—because there is no *post*." On the same trip, one of our most hopeful encounters was with members of a group made up of Palestinian and Israeli parents of children who had been killed in the ongoing conflict. Connected through the agony of grief, these parents expressed the powerful conviction that violence must end to spare more parents their experience.

While it was difficult to fathom the strength these parents required to share with us such painful and intimate experiences, later I found out that one of the key precipitating factors for the development of trauma lies in

7 It is worth noting that some early Anabaptist material cited Nahum positively, even alongside the Sermon on the Mount. See Derek Suderman, "Tackling Violence in the Prophets as a People of Peace: Anabaptist Hermeneutics Then and Now," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 98 (July 2024): 245–83.

8 For discussion of these issues with respect to the theological function of lament language and contemporary debates regarding God and violence respectively, see Derek Suderman, "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6.2 (2012): 201–17; Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 2 (2011): 151–62.

the lack of an empathetic witness—and that those who are able to voice their pain and share their experience are better able to move through their struggle and somehow emerge on the other side. While we felt simultaneously moved and helpless before their suffering, providing a listening ear to these parents perhaps made a small contribution.

**As followers of Jesus, we are called to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15)—and so to function as an empathetic witness.**

Seeing Nahum as trauma literature does not whitewash or excuse it. We are right to question its apparent misogyny and be profoundly disturbed by its portrayal of God's involvement in the sexual violence perpetrated against the city of Nineveh, depicted as a woman raped by foreign powers (Nahum 3). At the same time, we can forget to ask the questions with which we began: How might Nahum be useful? How may it help to point us toward the good news preached by and embodied in the life of Jesus?

Nahum leads us squarely into a tension that permeates scripture and our own contemporary world: How does God's overwhelming compassion, mercy, and concern for the oppressed and marginalized relate to the oppressors and those who maintain and take advantage of corrupt systems as they are? If God is *for* the widow, orphan, and stranger, doesn't this also mean that in some sense the divine is *against* the latter—epitomized by the Assyrians in Nahum, Pharoah in Exodus, and the social, economic, and religious elites elsewhere in the prophets?

Where we may understandably be offended by such material, looking away from the underlying suffering it reflects may blind us to how *we*—through our countries, militaries, and trade envoys—can expect and even coerce the rest of the world to work to our advantage. Given the contours of global social, economic, and military powers, those of us in North America may well be more aligned with the hated empire that Nahum rails *against* than his oppressed sub-group crying out against it. Our profound discomfort with the book may be heightened by positioning ourselves not with Nahum but with the empire he condemns and calls for God's vengeance to exorcise. In short, perhaps Nahum holds up a mirror that we would rather not look into.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15)—and so to function as an empathetic witness. In this light, I have found it helpful to read Nahum as a traumatized prophet speaking

through tears. From this perspective, the pain, anger, and desire for vengeance he expresses is not simply an invitation to argue against or reject his perspective; doing so would simply echo the mistake epitomized by Job's friends. Rather, Nahum provides us a window into the raw emotion and agonized perspective of traumatized communities—in the ancient world and today—that desperately call out for our attention. Nahum usefully raises for us these questions: Are we indeed willing to weep with those who weep? And are we willing to do so even when they say things we find disturbing and offensive—even potentially about *us*?

## Luke 22:35–38: Holy Warrior and Suffering Servant

Mary H. Schertz

Some biblical scholars have said that the most difficult passage in the entire Bible is the "two swords" passage in Luke 22:35–38—not the goriest or most violent but the hardest to understand. Certainly, Mennonite peace theologians have wrung their hands over it for years. Even Jesus seems to recognize the problem that he is creating when he tells the disciples that, whereas earlier he told them to operate without weapons, now they should go buy swords.

In this text and its context in Luke 22, Luke's Jesus is challenged by the tensions between two of the biblical motifs he found in his sacred scripture: the Holy Warrior and the Suffering Servant. Fortunately, Luke gives us a clear reading guide—or at least it would have been clear to a first-century aural audience. It is a chiasm, and it's neither the first nor the only time Luke uses this literary device to guide his hearer. To sketch it briefly, there's Jesus's prediction of Peter's denial in verses 31–34, his conversation with his near and dear about the two swords in verses 35–38, his prayer to the Father at Olivet in verses 39–46, the arrest scene in which a sword plays a part in verses 47–52, and finally Peter's denial in verses 53–62. Thus, the chiasm: denial, swords, prayer, swords, denial. In this case, the chiasm functions to raise the question of what changes after the center element—or Jesus's prayer to the Father in verses 39–46.

Two things change, signaled by that small Greek word *plen*, usually translated as "nevertheless"—as in "nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." The first is Jesus's contemplation of Holy War, or redemptive violence, as a way to finish out God's investment in his life.

What are two swords "enough" for? Not insurrection, certainly, and likely not for self-defense for a group their size, even if that had been a biblical trope or what Jesus had in mind. But it is enough, in the biblical world, for Holy War. After all, to be woefully underarmed is part of the requirement for Holy War, lest anyone think that victory belongs to Israel.

The second thing that changes is how Jesus thinks of suffering—something he has been thinking about since chapter 9. South African biblical scholar H. A. J. Kruger has argued that the language of Holy War and the language of the Suffering Servant are both present in these passages. Swords—but also waiting, watching, and praying that one not be led into temptation—are the resonances of Holy War. And the quotation from Isaiah about being numbered with transgressors brings the Suffering Servant theme front and center.

**What are two swords "enough" for? Not insurrection, certainly.**

The resolution hammered out that night between Jesus and the Father as the disciples slept and—as Mary Oliver puts it—only the stars, the grass, and the cricket kept watch with Jesus was the integration of these two motifs. Jesus yields to the will of God and goes to the cross as a Holy Warrior who is not violent and a Suffering Servant who is not passive. What this means is worked out, first, in the rest of this chiastic passage but then in Jesus's journey to the cross and in Acts with the disciples and particularly Paul.

The second "enough" in this chiastic arrangement, an entirely different Greek idiom from the sufficiency of the two swords, cuts the myth of redemptive violence to the heart. "Enough of this," Jesus says, and then he heals the wound opened by his disciple's sword. But he is also neither silent nor passive in his acceptance of suffering. During the course of his ordeal, he manages at least three ringing indictments of his tormentors: (1) at the arrest scene, (2) his verbal jousting in the first stage of the interrogation before the council, and (3) on the cross when he pleads forgiveness for the ignorant ones.

Luke envisions the followers of Jesus forging into the future of the Kingdom of God as disciples who embody both the Holy Warrior and the Suffering Servant. It is a dynamic and forceful mix. In Acts, the followers of Jesus move boldly into a variety of situations with a fiery spirit and strong words—accepting suffering in the name of Jesus as par for the course. What seems to a modern audience to be an enigmatic and opaque

ancient text is—based on first-century understandings of oral literature—a clear and ringing call to reject redemptive violence as well as passive suffering. It is a call to courage and compassion in the most difficult of times.

## Acts 5:1–16: The judgment of Ananias and Sapphira

Alicia J. Batten

The story of Ananias and Sapphira has disturbed readers for centuries. Yes, both figures independently lie about the amount of money that they obtained from the sale of their property. And, yes, they clearly "misappropriated" funds. (Acts 5:2 uses the Greek verb *nosphizomai*, which can also mean "theft" in some contexts.)[9] However, there is no hint that the couple even have a chance to repent of their sin, for after hearing the judgmental words of Peter, they each abruptly fall down and die. As early as the third century, a philosopher (likely Porphyry of Tyre) accuses Peter of putting the pair to death unjustly and questions whether what they had done is really a sin.[10] Subsequent readers have struggled to make sense of the account as well.[11]

It is hard to know where this story came from, as we cannot assume that the book of Acts—the second volume by the author of the Gospel of Luke—reflects historicity, at least not all the time. Some have argued for a literary precedent in the story of Achan, who incites God's anger by stealing property and is eventually killed (Joshua 7), but there are many differences with that tale as well. Whatever the origins of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we are left with the question of how to make sense of it today, especially in light of a commitment to justice and peacemaking.

As with many biblical stories, this one demands that readers attend to the historical, literary, and theological contexts in which the narrative emerged. The story is *high context*, meaning that it assumes its readers share its literary and cultural worlds and thus does not explain these features. Within the ancient Graeco-Roman environment, for example, it

9 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, ANTC (Abingdon, 2003), 102.

10 For the *Contra Christianos*, attributed to Porphyry, see R. Joseph Hoffman, *Porphyry's "Against the Christians": The Literary Remains* (Prometheus, 1994), 54–55.

11 For discussion of the early Christian reception of this story, see Ronald H. van der Bergh, "Thematic and Chronological Analysis of the Reception of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) in the First Five Centuries," *Journal of Early Christian History* 7 (2017): 1–16.

was common for people to seal almost every business or financial transaction with an oath, and this ritual included a self-curse for perjury. In other words, people vowed that they would die if they lied. This self-curse was so familiar that it would be assumed in a narrative, whether or not it was expressly mentioned.[12]

When we consider Acts 5:1–11 in light of this information, we see that an audience would recognize the account as a typical story of people committing perjury and suffering the consequences. Moreover, Ananias and Sapphira have lied to the Holy Spirit and to God, as Peter makes clear (Acts 5:3–4). Throughout Acts, Luke portrays various heroes, such as Paul, as taking vows (Acts 18:18; 21:20–26).[13] Such practices convey the piety of Paul and other figures, which Luke is keen to uphold in the face of accusations of "atheism." As well, there are warnings that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10).[14] Therefore, the seemingly shocking deaths of Ananias and Sapphira would not come as a surprise for ancient audiences, for both figures have committed a great act of impiety by breaking their promise, lying not only to other humans but also to the Holy Spirit and God.

In addition, the text indicates that Satan had been at work within Ananias and Sapphira (5:3) just as Satan entered Judas before he betrayed Jesus for money (Luke 22:3), and Luke describes Judas also coming to a grisly end (Acts 1:18–19). For Luke, Satan had to be stopped if the church was going to develop, especially if Satan was trying to operate within the church itself.[15] Notably, Judas's betrayal was connected to financial gain, just as Ananias and Sapphira lied about the proceeds from the sale of their property. Luke's stress on economic matters—whether it is the portrayal of the earliest church in Jerusalem as a utopian community in which the members share their possessions (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37), Jesus's insistence on giving money to the poor (Luke 18:22), or the commendation of Cornelius for his charity and giving alms (Acts 10:4, 31)[16]—therefore form part of the backdrop of these stories.

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12 J. Albert Harrill, "Divine Judgment against Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11): A Stock Scene of Perjury and Death," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 354.

13 Although this may be a difficult issue for Anabaptists, Luke does not share the prohibition against oaths that we find in Matt. 5:34 and James 5:12.

14 Harrill, "Divine Judgment," 365.

15 Gaventa, *Acts*, 103.

16 See Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross

Directly following his account of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke depicts the community in Jerusalem as restored and the people holding the apostles, including Peter, in high honour. Indeed, even more believers join the church (Acts 5:12–14). Although the story of the couple may seem severe and unfair, it has the effect of reinforcing the importance of keeping one's vow and the danger of attempting to deceive the Holy Spirit and, indeed, God. Moreover, through this account Luke stresses economic integrity and, perhaps most important for the author, the need to keep Satan at bay.

Attention to these ancient social, literary, and theological dimensions is requisite if we want to get at the meaning of what to most moderns is an unduly harsh punishment for lying. We might wonder, however, what elements are relevant today, especially for those who do not think that the death penalty is appropriate for any sort of lie or crime. To my mind, although Luke shifts to more of a charity model throughout the book of Acts,[17] what must remain central are the emphases on the common good and the need to take seriously God's interest in the practical questions of how economic resources are both procured and divided. Despite their strangeness, ancient stories such as that of Ananias and Sapphira are reminders that issues of economic integrity are no less theological than any other.

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Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Baker Academic, 2008), 17–36.

17 See Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will?"

# 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.*
>
> *–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

Layton Friesen is the academic dean of Steinbach Bible College and a minister in the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. He is the author of *Secular Nonviolence and the Theo-Drama of Peace: Anabaptist Ethics and the Catholic Christology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (T&T Clark, 2022).

# Three Epiphanies

## A peace-seeking journey with MCC

Esther Epp-Tiessen

It was long after dark when we heard the familiar soft tap on the back door of our small house. Even before we opened the door, we knew it was our friend Ada. About thirty minutes later, a similar tap ushered in Ada's partner James. They always arrived in this way—after dark, silently and separately—to avoid detection.

Our house was a small bungalow in Malaybalay, in the southern Philippines. Dan and I had arrived there in mid-1982 for an assignment with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). We were to accompany and support Filipinos striving for justice, peace, and human rights in a context where these were sorely lacking.

Dan and I had inherited the friendship with Ada and James from our predecessors, Earl and Pat Martin. The Martins had warned us that folks like Ada and James would shake the foundations of our MCC and Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence. They were right.

Dan and I came into that initial MCC assignment young and naïve. Just out of university, we had limited job experience, and we had no prior international service experience. We had both completed master's degrees: Dan's in Bible and religious studies and mine in Canadian history. We had studied Anabaptist history and embraced—at least intellectually—the early Anabaptists' conviction to "forsake the sword," but our understanding was shallow and untested. Yet MCC trusted us enough to send us into a context where an armed struggle was being waged.

From that initial four-year assignment, I spent most of my working career with MCC in peace-related work. When I wasn't a staff person, I was often serving on an MCC board, committee, or advisory group. My life was immersed in the MCC world. It was within MCC that I discovered my vocation and deep passion for seeking peace and where I experienced the most beautiful and the most heart-breaking encounters in that search. Below I reflect on three distinct epiphanies on my journey.

## Epiphany one: Structural violence and the pursuit of justice

Prior to arriving in the Philippines, I was introduced to the concept of structural violence by a Christian Marxist university professor. He described the systems of capitalist and neo-liberal economics that enrich small elites and impoverish the masses and the tools of repression used against any resistance. He explained how violence was not only—perhaps even not primarily—delivered by guns and bullets and bombs; it was also the result of systems that stole the land of peasants and deprived the poor of sufficient food, water, education, or health care. He introduced us to the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez and the winds of liberation theology that were blowing across Latin America. He had little patience for a Christian pacifism that did not actively support the dismantling of systems of injustice.

**He had little patience for a Christian pacifism that did not actively support the dismantling of systems of injustice.**

A year later, Dan and I witnessed the very realities of which my professor had spoken. We saw transnational corporations take over vast tracts of land for sugar, pineapple, and banana plantations, pushing peasants to farm steep and erosion-prone hillsides. We observed the International Monetary Fund impose a "structural adjustment" scheme on the country, demanding reductions in government spending on education, health, and social programs, while opening the door to foreign investment. We witnessed children dying of diarrhea and dehydration because families had no resources to go to the clinic. We befriended political prisoners whose crime was seeking to organize a village cooperative. We accompanied workers from the Catholic diocese to remote communities to document the military's assassinations and other human rights violations. We saw clear evidence of American (and, by association, Canadian) diplomatic and military support for a regime that benefited foreign interests and a small local elite. It quickly became clear to us why many Filipinos—especially the rural poor—supported the New People's Army (NPA) and the revolutionary struggle.

Ada and James were organizers for the National Democratic Front (NDF) in the Philippines in the early 1980s. The NDF was a broad multi-sectoral coalition of groups that supported the armed struggle of the New People's Army and its goal of overthrowing the corrupt regime of Ferdinand Marcos and establishing a society based on economic equality

and social democratic principles. Ada and James's job was to connect with middle class people, business leaders, church people, and people from other sectors to gain their support for the struggle.

Ada and James were gifted and passionate young people who had committed their lives to a better future for the poor and oppressed of their country. By aligning themselves with the NDF and the NPA, they had chosen the "preferential option for the poor" and a life of hardship. Their mission was exceedingly dangerous, as they could have been arrested, tortured, and "salvaged" by the Philippine military at any moment.[1] We often marveled at the risks they were willing to take. We knew not to ask too many questions or even to inquire as to their real names.

**They let us know that if we were not prepared to work for justice for the poor, our platitudes for peace were meaningless—even harmful.**

We nevertheless had numerous deep conversations about "the struggle." For James, Ada, and their comrades, *peace* was a dirty word. *Peace* meant support for the status quo and for injustice and inequality. They had heard too many powerful people urging "peace, peace" with no concern for the structural violence that killed and marginalized so many Filipinos. They let us know that if we were not prepared to work for justice with those living in poverty, our platitudes for peace were meaningless—even harmful. They and many other Catholic friends quoted Pope Paul VI's famous adage from 1972, "If you want peace, work for justice."

After four years in the Philippines, Dan and I returned to Canada. Like many MCC workers, we had been transformed by our experience. We had been confronted with our power and privilege and the colonial systems of which we were a part. We had heard penetrating critiques of naïve and simplistic understandings of peace and peacemaking that did not attend to circumstances of grave injustice. We had been humbled by the compassion, commitment, and courage of faithful Christians seeking to overturn the circumstances of the marginalized. We would never be the same.

1 *Salvaging* was a term used to refer to the summary apprehension and execution by the Philippine military of suspected criminals or political opponents of the regime.

## Epiphany two: Confronting abuse and sexual violence

Soon after our return to Canada in 1986, I was drawn into MCC's work with Women's Concerns. The Women's Concerns program had arisen in response to the calls of women within the Mennonite constituency for equality in church and society. As a young adult, I had been inspired by the emergence of Christian feminism. I was delighted that MCC was prepared to address realities of patriarchy and sexism. I got involved as a volunteer, then as a committee member, and then as a staff person at MCC Ontario.

It was inevitable that Women's Concerns would be confronted with stories of women and girls experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse. MCC Canada Women's Concerns director Peggy Regehr repeatedly said that she wasn't eager to address these topics. But, given the number of women who shared their stories with her, she could not remain silent. Together with others, she committed herself to the courageous and challenging work of naming the realities of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Mennonite homes and churches.[2]

**I had to come to terms with revelations that my father was one of those male Mennonite leaders who used his power to sexually abuse someone.**

During these years, I took stock of a personal childhood experience of molestation by an uncle and a terrifying encounter in my teens when a man threatened me on a dark sidewalk one night. It was the first time in many years that I had thought about those events and considered their impact on me.

Years later, I also had to come to terms with revelations that my father, Frank Epp, was one of those male Mennonite leaders who used his power to sexually abuse someone. All my life, I had looked up to my father—as a prophetic voice for peace with respect to the Vietnam War, the Middle East, and other contexts. Since my childhood, he had inspired me with his bold speaking, writing, and acting for peace. I wanted to be a peace activist like him. The news of his moral failure devastated me. His betrayal was bad enough; that he was a peacemaker only compounded the pain. In many ways, I am still coming to terms with the contradiction.

2 Other women who played important roles in breaking the silence around abuse in Mennonite circles were psychologist and author Carolyn Holderread Heggen, counsellor Melissa Miller, and theologians Lydia Harder and Carol Penner.

I did not, however, abandon my advocacy work for justice and peace because of my father's personal transgressions. Although I floundered for some time, I recognized that many other people had guided and mentored me into becoming a seeker of peace. I could let go of the tether that tied me to my father and could, rather, cling to a great cloud of peace witnesses—past, present, and future—as inspiration for my work.

But I also learned from feminist theologians that there were some basic flaws in the expression and articulation of Anabaptist peace theology. A peace position that rejected participation in war was seriously deficient if it did not confront gender-based violence and abuse. If Filipinos taught me that peace-seeking must always include justice-making, my Mennonite women friends taught me that a peace theology that critiqued participation in war but turned a blind eye to the violence toward and abuse of women and girls lacked credibility and integrity. They taught me that striving for peace must always involve listening to and taking direction from the vulnerable and the marginalized.

## Epiphany three: Finding the pearl of great price

In 2000, now living in Winnipeg, I became the coordinator of MCC Canada's peace ministries program—a position that I held for ten years. From its inception in 1963, MCC Canada had been charged with "tending the flame" of the Anabaptist peace witness, and the peace ministries program is essentially where that role was lodged. I began the job not having a clue of what to do.

I didn't have long to wait, for the events of 9/11 took place within one short year. Soon after that the United States led a "coalition of the willing" in attacking Afghanistan and then Iraq in 2003 for their supposed involvement in 9/11. Canada joined the war on Afghanistan and between 2001 and 2014 sent 40,000 soldiers there to fight; 165 of them were killed.

Suddenly, I found myself having to grapple with issues of war and militarism and with MCC's mandate to uphold Anabaptist peace convictions related to participation in war. Together with MCC Canada's Ottawa Office, we began to advocate against Canadian involvement in Afghanistan and against the significant military spending it entailed. We urged Canada to withstand US pressure to join the invasion of Iraq in

2003.[3] My visit to Iraq in 2002, when the drums of war were already beating, was a formative experience. I will never forget the plea of an Iraqi teacher, "Please, be a messenger of peace."

In addition, a few Canadian Mennonites also urged MCC to advocate for a legal means for conscientious objectors to divert their "military taxes" to a special peace fund. The Ottawa Office had made some headway in pressing the government for a peace tax fund in the 1990s. I regret now that I didn't push harder for MCC to devote energy to that task in the 2000s.

**My studies and my devotional life led me to a deeper embrace of Christ-centered nonviolence.**

During this time, I was grateful for the collaboration and theological reflection that was shared within my cross-Canada peace network and a binational peace committee that brought together MCC staff and constituents.

I deeply believed that an Anabaptist commitment to peace and nonviolence went beyond conscientious objection to war. And so, as the war receded into the background, I and my network took on other peace issues. With scientists worldwide predicting a climate catastrophe, we developed resources to foster grassroots action to preserve the earth. With MCC's Palestinian and Israeli partners crying for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation, we implemented a campaign to build awareness of the suffering of Palestinians.

This was good and important work. Nevertheless, throughout these years, I felt something was missing. I felt scattered and unfocused; so much of the work seemed reactive. Thinking that more education would help, I enrolled in a master's in theology program to gain deeper theological grounding. I loved those studies. But more important than the head knowledge I gained was the heart knowledge. My studies and my devotional life led me to a deeper embrace of Christ-centered nonviolence. To put it simply, I fell in love with Jesus and his revolutionary embodiment of peace with justice, mercy, and love. I discovered "the pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45–46).

3 A deeply gratifying project was a Women's Fast for Peace. Eventually, Prime Minister Jean Chretien decided against official Canadian participation in the war. Sometime later he told a Lutheran bishop that the voice of Christian churches had been critical in his decision. He said, "The unanimous opposition expressed by church leaders made a huge difference in the cabinet discussion."

I was particularly drawn to the writings of Catholic priest and activist John Dear and his concept of "disarming the heart."[4] Dear emphasizes the importance of linking inner peace with a life of public action for peace and justice. Indeed, he argues that it is only as we allow God to disarm our own hearts that we may become instruments of God's disarming love in the world. My *modus operandi* was to emphasize the latter at the expense of the former. I still find the practice of meditation and centering prayer a struggle, but since that third epiphany I have deliberately sought to ground my acting for peace in my relationship with Jesus. Indeed, I have come to believe that a life of Christian nonviolence is near impossible without a close walk with the incarnate One.

I am not sure whether the discovery of this "pearl of great price" changed my work with MCC's peace ministries program. Looking back, I wish I would have done more to articulate a vision for peacebuilding rooted in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

## Ongoing concerns

The story doesn't end there. I took a two-year leave from MCC in 2011 and 2012 to write a history of MCC in Canada.[5] When I returned in early 2013, MCC Canada's peace program no longer existed. I was assigned to work with the Ottawa Office on more focused advocacy and public engagement campaigns. I found this work meaningful, but I was deeply saddened that the peace program had been eliminated—without a formal program review or any consultation with stakeholders in the constituency.

The rationale given for the change was that a new approach was needed—one that infused specific "peace practices" throughout the organization. This shift reflected movement toward defining peace in MCC more as an operating principle or mode of activity or even a skillset. I believed there was much to commend this new approach. At the same time, I felt the decision flew in the face of the organization's historic mandate and the longstanding commitment to root MCC's peace work in a Christ-centered theological imagination. As I wrote to MCC leadership at the time, I was dismayed that there was no longer a home within MCC Canada for sustained theological reflection on peace and peacebuilding, for equipping MCC staff to articulate that foundation, or for nurturing

4 See especially John Dear, *Disarming the Heart: Toward a Vow of Nonviolence* (Paulist Press, 1987).

5 See Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2013).

MCC constituents and supporters for public peace witness, nonviolent action, and nonviolent resistance.

I continue to hold these concerns. Today, organizations like MCC are increasingly constrained to please their donors, to demonstrate specific results within short timeframes, and to minimize risk. Moreover, MCC workers are increasingly removed from the voices of the people it seeks to serve: the poor, the marginalized, and the victimized. These developments foster neither deep theological engagement nor bold and courageous peace witness. I wonder where the forums are for staff and constituents to reflect and act together within theologically rooted convictions. How might MCC more actively nurture the disarming of hearts and the world? How do the privileged—MCC workers and constituents—work for peace with integrity? How might we center marginalized voices in our work and witness for peace?

## Conclusion

As I look back on some thirty years of involvement with MCC and its peace and justice work after leaving in 2018, I am grateful to MCC for the opportunity to learn and grow in profound ways, and I am humbled by the trust that MCC placed in me. I am thankful to have found my vocation in MCC and for the colleagues who mentored and supported me along the way. My hope and my prayer is that MCC might nurture the deep Christ-centered roots that ground, nourish, and give life and vitality to its ministry of peace. My hope and my prayer is that MCC will continue to be a place where the stories, counsel, and admonition of the most vulnerable of God's children shape and challenge that ministry.

## About the author

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# Constructive agency under duress

## A research note on "Witnessing Peace"

Janna L. Hunter-Bowman

My book *Witnessing Peace: Becoming Agents Under Peace in Colombia* (Routledge, 2022) seeks to honor a key source of hope for transformation amid Colombia's ongoing armed conflict: the violence-affected communities that self-protect to survive amid onslaught and struggle to change the conditions of violence that threaten them. It is rooted in learning alongside and thinking with Colombian communities about peacebuilding as a politics of justpeace. I am a white US American Mennonite who lived in Colombia and worked with the Colombian Mennonite Church based organization Justapaz for eight and a half years (2001–2004; 2006–2010). I then returned to do engaged research with colleagues and friends who became community collaborators in research.

This essay draws from *Witnessing Peace* to define constructive agency under duress. It offers an example of a woman peacebuilder who suffered sexualized violence in the context of the protracted armed conflict and the transformation of relationships of power within a peace community. Reflection on praxis with women peacebuilders in Colombia brings into view the need for precision about power relations in peace communities or "constituencies of peace."[1] It sketches several inadequacies of John Howard Yoder's peace theologies and highlights the conceptual development of a third wave of peace theology.

### Constructive agency under duress

When persons enact change amid high levels of constraint, injustice, and direct violence endemic to situations of armed conflict, they participate in what might be called constructive agency under duress. It accounts for agents, actions, and accomplishments that those oriented by the state miss. There are two key elements of this idea. First, *duress* is deeply embedded in histories of injustice. The longitudinal effects of colonial relation-

1 This term is borrowed from John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (United States Institute of Peace, 1998).

ships of power are visible in present hierarchies of class, race, and gender (through patriarchy is also indigenous). These histories inform current relations of power that make some people important at the expense of others who are excluded socially, politically, and economically. They make some lives count at the expense of others that do not count.

Gender norms produce differentiated levels of duress and vulnerability within communities, as patriarchy is experienced differently by different community members.[2] A "wall of silence" often surrounded acts of violence against women in the context of armed conflict.[3] Silence speaks volumes about the patriarchal gender norms that make some bodies count more than others. It often conveys a great deal about the basis and bias grounding some forms of violence, about why some acts of violence are more sayable than others. Naming patriarchal gender norms is important because it elucidates how multiple forms of constraint impact people and how intersecting, interlocking forms place people under duress both simultaneously and differently. It introduces a vocabulary that brings into view and helps us come to grips with different experiences linked to gendered hierarchies of power.

Second, *constructive* responses can occur under duress. This use of *constructive* is linked to the term *under duress* and its place in Catholic conversations, where it refers to constraints on personal freedom that lead someone to cooperate with evil. It is an analogical extension, however, because I am not talking about how people have been forced into entanglements with evil but rather about what people have been able to accomplish under duress.

## Becoming agents in God's times

As a human rights and peacebuilding field worker, I was deeply frustrated that the human rights–based frameworks of the dominant state-centered approaches to peacebuilding were unable to detect the transformative agency and generative activity of violence-affected communities on the

2 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (Routledge, 2000), 168–69.

3 "Colombia: 'Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes': Sexual Violence against Women in the Armed Conflict," Amnesty International, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/040/2004/en/; "La JEP abre macrocaso 11, que investiga la violencia basada en género, incluyendo violencia sexual y reproductiva, y crímenes cometidos por prejuicio," https://www.jep.gov.co:443/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimenes.aspx.

ground. War-affected communities taught me to see how they experienced God in the world and the world with God: the conditions they were living under were unacceptable to God, and they cooperated with God to survive and bring about change. As a result, I turned to theology for alternative notions of power, authority, and agency.

Participants in constructive interventions spoke about *how* they were able to respond under duress in terms of God's time. Inspired by them, we might trace the process of victims becoming agents in two kinds of sacred time: (1) interruptive time (best known as *Messianic* time in Mennonite theologies) and (2) gradual time (best known through liberation theologies). Interruptive time is expressed in community-based interventions in moments of crises that allow survival independent of state power and state knowledge. They open up possibilities for further change. Gradual time is expressed in social processes, organizing, movement building, and other collective efforts that address material conditions of injustice. Both times are necessary for thinking about communities' contributions to a more just peace (or "justpeace").

**Colombian women peacebuilders' practice and critical reflection brought into view gendered experience and relations of power within communities seeking a justpeace.**

Messianic apocalyptic theology provides a rich vocabulary for talking about how communities become political agents through interrupting violence and transcending moments of crisis. Messianic time breaks with the sequential, linear time and ways of seeing of the nation-state. A partnered gradual eschatology is also necessary to account for communities' engagement with state institutions and pluralistic working groups, social movements, and networks that are transformative. Gradual eschatology also accounts for the generative challenges and transformative processes *within* a community building peace.

The pairing of times offers a framework for nonviolent peacebuilding that centers constructive agents under duress. In the lens of these times, change toward justpeace occurs vertically (at various levels of society—namely, locally, regionally, and nationally) and horizontally (within a community).[4] In this approach, churches or peace communities are

4 In John Paul Lederach's influential social change model, people at various locations on a "social pyramid" or "triangle"—grassroots, midlevel, and elite "levels"—look for cross-cutting points of contact and develop synergies. The ability to connect and collaborate

legible as political agents of change within a larger context of subsystems and society-wide systems.[5] However, in this approach peace communities themselves are also *subject to change*.

Colombian women peacebuilders' practice and critical reflection brought into view gendered experience and relations of power within communities seeking a justpeace. They point to the need for conceptual development in the peacebuilding categories of Lederach and to the inadequacies in John Howard Yoder's peace theology. The theology of constructive agency under duress seeks to contribute necessary conceptual resources.

## The practice and critical reflection of women peacebuilders

I first learned of Luz (a pseudonym) through documentation of death threats she received.[6] She found a scrawled note on the open-air kitchen table in her rural home: "Withdraw," it said, "or else." Members of a paramilitary organization threatened her in an effort to intimidate and stop her from organizing political power for land reform on the Caribbean coast with her church and local communities. She did not desist in that instance. Nor did the respected and increasingly well-known and effective community leader capitulate to other demands that she cease her "meddling." Rather, her work expanded to national-level advocacy efforts to dismantle structures that consolidated land holdings regionally through direct coercion, economic power, and the power of political elites. I grew to know her personally while working with regional leaders, international nongovernmental organizations, and embassies to advocate for institutional land reform. Her face was impassive, and her voice emerged as from deep still water as she delivered her testimony and the group's proposals. During this time, I learned that when she refused to step down from her political organizing work, the paramilitary group sent men to her home who raped her repeatedly. Luz consistently named violence against women in her advocacy and political organizing at a time when doing so was rare, but she did not speak publicly or with her local community about

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across levels is strategic. This is a key idea in the field of transformative peacebuilding today. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (United States Institute of Peace, 1998), 39.

5 This language draws on Lederach's lens of a nested paradigm. Lederach, *Building Peace*, 60–61.

6 This section of the essay draws from Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, chapter 4, 169–75.

her own horrifying experiences. Instead, she confided in trusted women who supported her in her efforts to survive, maintain a range of relationships, and struggle against paramilitary domination of her community and the territory even as it threatened to splinter her own life. The peace theology and peacebuilding frameworks at my disposal in the early 2000s did not supply sharp tools for evaluating the gendered situation that Luz faced.

**Luz used the tools at her disposal deliberately and strategically to subvert the paramilitary's efforts to dominate her activity.**

I conducted focus groups with feminist theologians and women peacebuilders who were familiar with the situation and others like it. For the women in the ecumenical group, Luz used the tools at her disposal deliberately and strategically to subvert the paramilitary's efforts to dominate her activity and, by extension, the movement to organize power. She was negotiating pain and discerning her own limits while working with the community-based platform, a source of empowerment and risk she chose to accept. She was exercising a form of constructive agency under duress with the women who supported her. Her negotiation and decisions took on new significance over the years as the social movement recognized, reckoned with, and developed strategies to deal with issues of patriarchal gender norms and sexualized violence. For example, experiences like Luz's and more everyday sexual violence eventually led women and men to create the "gender subgroup" of the land-defense working group catalyzed by churches in which Luz participated. Furthermore, as I write in *Witnessing Peace*, the gender subgroups' practices, which were "rich in psychological content, [began] to heal the pain that [had] seeped into the souls of people who [were] recipients of quotidian gender violence."[7] These are extraordinarily significant developments in the struggle to transform gendered domination of certain bodies over other bodies, over whole communities, and over territory. They speak to the generative challenges, processes of unlearning, and reorganization of power germane to a peace community in gradual time.

In sum, this is a case in which collective agency did not absorb the individual. A small group of women contributed to processes of structural change within a community of peace and altered the flow of power within it. A gradual process *within* the community strengthened collective agency

7 Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 173.

building peace. It advanced a just peace in society (vertically) through internal transformation (horizontally).[8] Theologically, the need for and enactment of such reckoning does not undermine the peace witness or render the peace community incoherent. *Witnessing Peace* posits this internal reckoning, unlearning and relearning, and reorganization of power within a peace community as a vital aspect of the journey in gradual time. It works against glossing over important internal difference, fixing what is dynamic, and abstracting from history what is always contextual.

## Woman peacebuilders and Mennonite models of peacebuilding

*Witnessing Peace* relies on kinds of time that Mennonites have written about before—namely, eschatologies. It reads John Paul Lederach as a political theologian and one of the foremost proponents of such eschatologies. As I state in the book, "Throughout his career, Lederach has been prompted by his experiences in conflict settings and by the Mennonite tradition that shaped him to challenge the singular, linear view of history presumed in much of conflict resolution and in some peacebuilding and peace studies. He cites Christian eschatology and apocalyptic ethics of Mennonite theologians wherein the present and future—or eschaton—overlap in the 'already, not yet' kingdom as a significant influence on his thinking and action."[9]

Yet the Colombian women peacebuilders help to identify some of the limitations of peacebuilding frames rooted in Anabaptist peace theology. Constructive agency under duress offers the vision of a peace community that interrupts violence, catalyzes processes that involve organizing political power, and *reckons with patterns of injustice engrained not just in society but in the community building peace*. It provides specification about internal relations of power within the peacebuilding community. It therefore brings into view limitations of Lederach's concept of peacebuilding communities ("constituencies of peace")[10]—namely, the lack of sharp con-

8 Lederach, *Building Peace*, 39.

9 Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 17. See John Paul Lederach, "Recollections and the Construction of a Legacy: The Influence of John Howard Yoder on My Life and Work," paper presented at Believers Church Conference, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, March 7, 2002. Despite some differences I name here, I continue to identify with Lederach's peacebuilding tradition. See Heather DuBois and Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford University Press, 2015).

10 Lederach, *Building Peace*.

ceptual tools to critique hierarchies of power, patriarchal or otherwise, if the constituencies contribute to peace. It shows that conflict transformation categories themselves are not necessarily sensitive to the structure or quality of relationships within a peace constituency or transformational platform.[11] Conflict transformation rebuilds relationships across divides through context-sensitive, inclusive, multi-level processes that appreciate conflict as a motor of change to address the relational patterns at the epicenter of conflict.[12] The gender-sensitive specification and conceptual development called for by Colombian women peacebuilders is in keeping with Lederach's aims. Yet without precise language about internal power dynamics, equity,[13] and mechanisms for the participation of marginalized voices, the justpeace orientation of conflict transformation "characterized by approaches that reduce violence and destructive cycles of social interaction and at the same time increase justice in any human relationship" may enable gendered forms of duress to persist in the constituency of peace and in the moral imagination that normalizes and sustains it.[14]

Identifying and coming to terms with the limitations of the category prevents us from invisibilizing them and encourages deliberate designs for relational patterns. For example, when the Colombian community-based project Luz inspired refused to further reinforce established gender hierarchies, gendered social norms, and silence about violence against women in its internal workings, it worked against engraining such hierarchies, social norms, and silences into its function of "critical yeast," which Lederach defines as small groups of people who leaven society with moral imagination and new possibilities.[15] Rather than normalizing gendered asymmetries of power, the women wove relational webs of solidarity, provided resources for critical analysis, enhanced interethnic participation

11 John Paul Lederach, "Process Structures as Platforms for Change," in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Good Books, 2003), 34–38, at 38.

12 See John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), 23; Lederach, *Building Peace*, 60–61; 39; Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*.

13 Lederach advocates creating right relationships based on equity in *Preparing for Peace*, 20. This evidences my claim that ethics, development of practices, specification, and conceptualization are needed to develop a Lederachian transformative approach to peace in light of orienting terms and resources that are present yet underdeveloped.

14 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, reprint edition (Oxford University Press, 2010), 182.

15 Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 91.

of women, and introduced critical question posing about topics that had been unspeakable.

I am concerned that theologians and peace scholars operating in the tradition of John Howard Yoder, including Lederach among many others, often oppose the churches (imagined as a fully realized eschatological community instead of a deeply flawed community journeying through *chronos*) to secular discourses and processes. As we have come to understand better in recent years, this excessively clean opposition can usefully highlight the flaws of the latter while disastrously hiding the failings of the former.[16] Here I am talking about the fit of John Howard Yoder's peace theology with Yoder's sexual predation and abuse of power. John Howard Yoder's messianic theology provided a model of Christian peacebuilding, but he mixed eschatologies with problematic results.[17] The communities that I worked alongside should vindicate his theology, but thinking with these Colombian communities instead—especially with the praxis of women peacebuilders—points out the limitations, namely, the fit between his theology and sexualized violence and abuse of power. Under the heading of messianic political theology, he mixes eschatologies in ways that enabled some forms of violence while obscuring others.

**The Colombian women peacebuilders help to identify some of the limitations of peacebuilding frames rooted in Anabaptist peace theology.**

Thinking with Luz and other constructive agents under duress brings to light the structural, political, and agential inadequacies of past theologies of nonviolent peacebuilding efforts like Yoder's. On a conceptual level, it reveals that his peace theology is of limited usefulness for reckoning with forms of violence within Mennonite peace church communities, institutions, and histories. It is of limited usefulness for bringing into view and coming to terms with hierarchies of power that he exploited. A vision that posits "the church as change" and "a conduit of generative political energy in history" is directed from the church toward transformation of

16 These sentences are reproduced from the introduction to Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 17.

17 Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "Constructive Agents Under Duress: Alternatives to the Structural, Political, and Agential Inadequacies of Past Theologies of Nonviolent Peacebuilding Efforts," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 149–68.

society.[18] It is of limited usefulness for critical self-reflection. After Yoder, those of us in peace theology orbits have no choice but to attend to sin *within* our communities, institutions, theological discourses, and histories. Peace theologies and normative theories of peacebuilding need to account for and resource the work of reckoning and internal transformation. Many are doing so.

## Conclusion: Toward a third wave peace theology

Perhaps it is useful to think about peace theology in waves. A wave is a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances. The first wave of peace theology, shaped by World War II, focuses on nonresistance. Guy Hershberger is representative of this wave. The second wave of peace theology, shaped by the Vietnam War and international service through Mennonite Central Committee, emphasizes transformation. John Howard Yoder and John Paul Lederach are leading voices of this wave. The third wave of peace theology *reckons* with the silenced forms of violence that have coexisted with peace theology's rejection of killing for the state (wave one) and emphasis on transformation (wave two). Women survivors of Yoder's violence and those who stood and spoke with them catalyzed the third wave.[19] Third wave peace practitioners and theologians are also reckoning with colonialism, antisemitism, and racism while carrying forward a Lederachian commitment to engagement for transformation. Developing the three waves is beyond the scope of this conclusion, but naming them is crucial to locating constructive agents under duress in the panorama of peace theologies, reflecting on the significance of Anabaptist-inflected peace witness today, and thinking about what comes next.

## About the author

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18 John Howard Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1998): 43–61, 53.

19 See for example the work of Carol Penner and other women in Elizabeth Yoder, ed., *Peace Theology and Violence against Women* (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992).

# Recent Roman Catholic affirmations of nonviolence

Rose Marie Berger

## Catholic nonviolence and just peace

Without much fanfare in September 2024, a new educational institute was launched in Rome, the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence (CIN). The mission of CIN is to make nonviolence research, resources, and experience more accessible to Pope Francis, the Vatican, and Catholic Church leaders, communities, and institutions from around the world to deepen Catholic understanding of, and commitment to, the practice of Gospel nonviolence. CIN is the fruit of more than a decade of strategic research and resource building by the global Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (CNI), a project of Pax Christi International, a Catholic peace movement based in Brussels with more than 120 member organizations worldwide.

In 2016, the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative partnered with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace for the Catholic Church's first gathering on Catholic nonviolence and Just Peace. The inaugural convocation affirmed the vision and practice of nonviolence to be at the heart of the Catholic Church.[1] Pope Francis's message blessed the endeavor with these words: "Your thoughts on revitalizing the tools of nonviolence, and of active nonviolence in particular, will be a needed and positive contribution."[2] Since then a steady shift has occurred, prompting US Catholic Cardinal Robert McElroy to state, "We need to mainstream nonviolence in the Church. We need to move it from the margins of Catholic thought

1 For more on the history of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and the process leading to the launch of the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, see Marie Dennis, ed., *Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence* (Orbis, 2018); Rose Marie Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode, and Marie Dennis, eds., *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World* (Pax Christi International, 2020).

2 "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson on the Occasion of the Conference on 'Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence' [Rome, 11–13 April 2016]," https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160406_messaggio-non-violenza-pace-giusta.html.

to the center. Nonviolence is a spirituality, a lifestyle, a program of societal action and a universal ethic."[3]

Cardinal McElroy notes that, given Pope Francis's clear leadership away from providing moral justifications for war, "it is hard not to conclude that the church is abandoning the just war framework and seeking to construct a new moral framework that has not yet emerged."[4] CNI proposes Just Peace as that emerging framework.

**Just Peace is a Christian school of thought and set of practices for building peace at all stages of acute conflict: before, during, and after.**

Just Peace is a Christian school of thought and set of practices for building peace at all stages of acute conflict: before, during, and after. It draws on three key approaches—principles and moral criteria, practical norms, and virtue ethics—for building a positive peace and constructing a more "widely known paradigm with agreed practices that make peace and prevent war."[5] Just Peace principles and moral criteria guide actions that can assist institutional change and provide a framework for judging ethical responsibility. Just Peace's practical norms provide guidance on constructive actions for peace, can be tested for effectiveness, and point toward a comprehensive just peace pedagogy and skills-based training. Just Peace virtue ethics teaches how to change our hearts. It asks what type of people we are becoming through the virtues we cultivate and shows us how to become people of peace. These three aspects form a head-body-heart approach. Just Peace is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of social, economic, and political conditions that sustain peace and human flourishing and prevent conflicts from turning violent or returning to violence.[6] Just Peace can move Christians beyond war.

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3 Bishop Robert McElroy, "Path of Nonviolence: Toward a Culture of Peace," Symposium, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (Vatican City, 4–5 April 2019).

4 Joshua J. McElwee, "Catholic activists praise pope's move away from just war theory," *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 12, 2020, https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/catholic-pacifists-praise-popes-move-away-just-war-theory.

5 Glen H. Stassen, "Just-Peacemaking Theory," *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, Allen Verhey (Baker Academic, 2011), 443.

6 Part of this language came from a personal email exchange with David Cortright at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (personal email, 3 March 2016).

## Digging deeper in our tradition

Just Peace is rooted in the biblical concept of *shalom.* Its meaning encompasses definitions such as wholeness, soundness, to be held in a peaceful covenant, and to be restored, healed, and repaid. It describes both domestic tranquility and neighborliness among nation-states. It is both a physical state and a spiritual state. It is a quality of right relationship (Malachi 2:6). Rabbinic scholars have taught, "All that is written in the Torah was written for the sake of peace."[7]

The phrase *Christian peacemakers* ought to be redundant. For Christians, Jesus is the incarnation of God's shalom and the manifestation of just peace. Many Christians—by the very nature of Christ's life, death, and resurrection—prioritize peace with justice and reject violence as a means toward peace, recognizing it as a failure. We are called to be courageous innovators who defend the "least of these"—without benefit of the world's weapons. The World Council of Churches spent the millennial decade studying how to overcome violence, producing two seminal documents: *An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* (declaring the concept and mentality of "just war" to be obsolete)[8] and the *Just Peace Companion* (offering extensive direction on implementation of just peace theology and practice).[9]

**The phrase *Christian peacemakers* ought to be redundant.**

Every Christian is charged with resisting evil, but none are given the right to kill. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI preached on Luke 6:27 ("Love your enemies"), saying it "is rightly considered the *magna carta* of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil, as a false interpretation of 'turning the other cheek' claims, but in responding to evil with good and thereby breaking the chain of injustice."[10]

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7 See Midrash Tanchuma (Shoftim 18).

8 World Council of Churches, *Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* (Geneva, 2011), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/ECJustPeace_English.pdf; see paragraph 23.

9 World Council of Churches, *Just Peace Companion* (Geneva, 2012), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/JustPeaceCompanion_2ndEd.pdf.

10 Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus sermon at St. Peter's Square, 18 Feb. 2007, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070218.pdf.

Pope Francis stressed that "faith and violence are incompatible."[11] Just Peace is an integral expression of Catholic faith and catechism,[12] which can be further developed into a robust and resilient theology,[13] theory, and praxis. If, as the US Catholic bishops wrote, "the content and context of our peacemaking is set not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church,"[14] then that teaching must be full-bodied, theologically grounded, effective, and adaptable from the local parish to the United Nations. However, the legitimation of war in Catholic social teaching remains,[15] and according to theological ethicist Glen Stassen, "without a widely known paradigm with agreed practices that make peace and prevent (and defuse) war, public debate will remain vague and unclear about the effective alternatives to the drive to war."[16]

## Three streams of Just Peace

There are three broad scholarly streams that feed the river of Just Peace. The first identifies "principles and moral criteria" to guide action and provide a framework for judging ethical responsibility. Maryann Cusimano Love has spent much of her career shaping these criteria and honing their effectiveness in the highest circles of government and the military. In a formulation that is familiar from just war principles,[17] Love has identified seven Just Peace principles that serve as a guide for directing action:

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11 Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope Francis: 'Faith and Violence are Incompatible'" *Zenit*, 19 Aug. 2013, https://zenit.org/articles/pope-francis-faith-and-violence-are-incompatible/.

12 Catechism of the Catholic Church (part 3, sec. 2, chap. 2, art. 5, "Peace," paragraphs 2302–2306), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm.

13 See Fernando Enns, "Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Just Peace," in *Just Peace: Ecumenical, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Fernando Enns and Annette Mosher (Wipf & Stock, 2013).

14 US National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (USCCB, 1983), http://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf.

15 Catechism of the Catholic Church (part 3, sec. 2, chap. 2, art. 5, "Avoiding War," paragraphs 2307–2317), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm.

16 Stassen, "Just-Peacemaking Theory," 443.

17 For Maryann Cusimano Love's comparison of just war principles and just peace principles, see "Drones: Ethics and Use," Catholic Social Ministries Gathering, Catholic University, Washington, DC, 4 Feb. 2014, slide 44, http://www.usccb.org/about/justice-peace-and-human-development/catholic-social-ministry-gathering/upload/drones-ethics-and-use-2014-02-04.pdf.

1. **Just cause:** protecting, defending, and restoring the fundamental dignity of all human life and the common good
2. **Right intention:** aiming to create a positive peace
3. **Participatory process:** respecting human dignity by including societal stakeholders—state and non-state actors as well as previous parties to the conflict
4. **Right relationship:** creating or restoring just social relationships both vertically and horizontally; strategic systemic change requires that horizontal and vertical relationships move in tandem on an equal basis
5. **Reconciliation:** a concept of justice that envisions a holistic healing of the wounds of war
6. **Restoration:** repair of the material, psychological, and spiritual human infrastructure
7. **Sustainability:** developing structures that can help peace endure over time[18]

Just Peace principles are applied at all stages of conflict. They are not only for *responding* to violence or war. From Love's point of view, peacebuilding tools and other methods of conflict transformation and nonviolence are all tools to implement Just Peace, and her Just Peace criteria guide those practices.

Love's approach is relationship-centered and participatory. Right relationship requires high levels of participation, bringing in multiple stakeholders. Love's Just Peace criteria are particularly well suited for use with institutional change. Institutions, writes Love, "are key for new norms to take hold."[19] Institutions *do* change, she writes, but they "learn by doing."[20] She has used these principles in her work with the United Nations, US Department of Defense, US Department of State, and other large institutions. "The Catholic Church helped create, publicize, and institutionalize just-war norms internationally," writes Love. She argues that it is an opportune time to do the same with Just Peace norms.

18 Maryann Cusimano Love, "What Kind of Peace Do We Seek? Emerging Norms of Peacebuilding in Key Political Institutions," in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Orbis, 2010), 82.

19 Love, "What Kind of Peace Do We Seek?," 56.

20 Love, "What Kind of Peace Do We Seek?," 58.

The second stream identifies Just Peace's "practical norms." These are just peacemaking practices, available for use before, during, and after conflict, that can be tested for effectiveness, provide guidance on constructive actions for peace, and point toward a comprehensive Just Peace pedagogy and skills-based training. Over the past thirty years, numerous scholars have contributed to honing a set of ten just peacemaking practices. The late ethicist Glen Stassen at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite at Chicago Theological Seminary have brought significant leadership to this robust set of Just Peace practical norms. Stassen has described just peacemaking as "the new paradigm for an ethics of peace and war,"[21] shifting the debate away from limiting war, as just war principles do, to practicing peace.

**Just Peace principles are applied at all stages of conflict. They are not only for *responding* to violence or war.**

These Just Peace norms have been used in a variety of settings, such as negotiations on nuclear disarmament, diplomatic intervention seeking to stop the US invasion of Iraq,[22] denominational general conventions choosing to identify as "just peace churches,"[23] interreligious and interfaith collaborative efforts to develop Just Peace in other traditions,[24] and intervention to combat global gender-based violence.[25]

Stassen has argued, "It is necessary to have both (1) an explicitly Christian ethic with a strong scriptural base and (2) a public ethic that appeals to reason, experience, and need, and that cannot place the same emphasis on scripture and prayer that an explicitly Christian ethic can."[26] The version of the ten just peacemaking practices below reflects both.[27]

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21 Glen H. Stassen, "Winning the Peace," *Sojourners*, January 2005, 19.

22 See the Six-Point Plan and Stassen, "Winning the Peace," 19.

23 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "A Just Peace Future," part 1, *United Church News*, 5 June 2011; part 2, *United Church News*, 12 June 2011.

24 See Susan B. Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

25 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

26 Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 93–94.

27 Stassen, "Just-Peacemaking Theory," 443.

Part One: Peacemaking Initiatives

1. Support nonviolent direct action (Matt. 5:38–42)
2. Take independent initiatives to reduce threat (Matt. 5:38–42)
3. Use cooperative conflict resolution (Matt. 5:21–26)
4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness (Matt. 7:1–5)

Part Two: Working for Justice

5. Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty (Matt. 6:19–34)
6. Foster just and sustainable economic development (Matt. 6:19–34)

Part Three: Fostering Love and Community

7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system (Matt. 5:43ff)
8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights (Matt. 5:43ff)
9. Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade (Matt. 5:38ff)
10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations (Matt. 5:1–2, 7:28–29)

Stassen has said that his team was

> *aware that our social context includes a private/public dualism in which Jesus' way and also peacemaking get interpreted as idealistic and individualistic. To counter this distortion, we intentionally focused on ten practices—not ten ideals—and on historical and political-science evidence showing each practice is in fact working to prevent some wars. Furthermore, with the human nature variable in mind, a realistic understanding of human sin argues that these practices need to be institutionalized in policies, international networks, and laws in order to check and balance concentrations of political, economic, and military power.*[28]

28 Glen H. Stassen, "Transforming Initiatives of Just Peacemaking Based on the Triadic Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," a paper prepared for the Society of Biblical

Thistlethwaite brings extensive research into gendered violence and gendered Just Peace practices.

The third stream is Just Peace virtue ethics. A virtue is a disposition to "do good." Some virtues come naturally. Others, called "moral virtues," are acquired through practice, devotion, and community. Virtue ethics teaches how to create morally good cultures that foster morally good people. Eli S. McCarthy is a Catholic theological virtue ethicist. He has elaborated a Just Peace virtue ethic by integrating the Just Peace approaches of Stassen, Thistlethwaite, and Love. Virtue ethics, writes McCarthy, "is focused on the character of persons, but includes concern for both acts and ends or consequences. In virtue ethics, the primary ethical question asked is 'Who are we (am I) becoming?' before, 'What is the rule?' or 'What are the consequences?'"[29]

McCarthy states that "nonviolent peacemaking ought to be assessed as a distinct and central virtue" in and of its own right. If nonviolent peacemaking is a key virtue, then other virtues, such as justice and courage, are qualified in a new way and often-overlooked virtues such as "humility, solidarity, hospitality, and mercy" might be better recovered. McCarthy has developed seven practices that flow from and cultivate nonviolent peacemaking as a virtue:

1. **Celebrating the Eucharist** as Christ's nonviolent act of self-sacrifice, with secondary components of prayer, meditation, and fasting
2. **Training and education** in nonviolent peacemaking and resistance, with a secondary component of forming nonviolent peacemaking communities
3. **Attention to religious or spiritual factors,** especially in public discourse, and learning about religion, particularly in the form of intra-religious or inter-religious dialogue
4. **A constructive program** with its particular focus on the poor and marginalized
5. **Conflict transformation and restorative justice,** particularly in the form of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Literature, 2006, https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/Stassen_Transforming.pdf.

29 Eli S. McCarthy, "Called to Holiness: Integrating the Virtue of Nonviolent Peacemaking," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11, no. 1 (winter 2014): 67–92.

6. **Unarmed civilian protection,** a third-party intervention both in the form of international implementation and local peace teams
7. **Civilian-based defense,** a nonviolent form of civil defense that engages the broader society against an external threat or in the overthrow of a government[30]

McCarthy has argued that Love's Just Peace criteria and Stassen and Thistlethwaite's just peacemaking practical norms have embedded in them a desire for Christians to become better and more just peacemakers. He has added to their work an "orienting virtue ethic" along with the focused question, "What kinds of people are we becoming?"

## Catholic conversion to Just Peace

The centuries-old "just-war theory" sought to provide a means of determining when it was morally justifiable to break the commandment "Thou shall not kill," with guidelines regarding whether to go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and how to fight war in an ethical manner (*jus in bello*). Some Catholic scholars have worked to extend just war criteria to include *jus post bellum* to guide restorative practices in a post-war context.[31]

Love asserts that just war tradition, if anything, "tells you only how to limit war. It has nothing to say about how to build peace."[32] She compares the applicability of just war criteria to the decline in the death penalty. "It was once thought necessary to protect people, but now capacity has grown to protect people in other ways than the death penalty," writes Love.[33]

Thistlethwaite writes that Just Peace is not just a change in terminology; instead, it is "a paradigm shift away from the basic assumption behind just war criteria that war is inevitable."[34]

McCarthy argues that even a small shift in language might help delegitimize any link between "justice" and "killing," possibly opening space in Catholic imagination for relinking justice and life, justice and dignity,

30 McCarthy "Called to Holiness," 67–92.

31 See Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Orbis, 2010).

32 Maryann Cusimano Love, personal email correspondence with author (2 March 2016).

33 Love, personal email (2 March 2016).

34 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, personal email correspondence with author (2 March 2016).

justice and peace. Although a shift to the language of "limited war" instead of "just war" might better illuminate some "good intentions" in the just war tradition,

> *without the* turn *to a Just Peace approach–criteria, core practices, core virtues–then we as the Catholic Church continue to legitimate war as a practice as long as it is "limited." Such religious legitimation and more so the practice of war itself already has and will likely continue to obstruct the development of our imagination, will, and practice of Just Peace approaches, and thus, leave us too easily influenced and determined by those in political, economic, and military positions of power.*[35]

Catholic Social Teaching provides a rich context in which to build a systemic body of thought and practice of Christian nonviolence. An overarching strategic objective of Just Peace is to develop a systematic analysis of nonviolence to cultivate effective approaches to addressing contemporary challenges in society through nonviolent means. Just Peace can be applied at all stages of conflict, including climate change–related conflict and "resource wars." Just Peace can be thoroughly integrated with Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* agenda in a manner that recognizes that violence done to human communities is often accompanied by devastating environmental destruction. An integral ecology contributes to an integral Just Peace.

## About the author

Rose Marie Berger, senior editor at *Sojourners* magazine (sojo.net), is a founding member of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. This article is dedicated to friend, colleague, and teacher Duane Shank, a Mennonite conscientious objector to war. Some content is adapted and expanded with permission from work previously published in *Choosing Peace: The Catholic Church Returns to Gospel Nonviolence*, ed. Marie Dennis (Orbis, 2018).

35 Eli S. McCarthy "Summoning the Catholic Church: Turn to Just Peace" (2016), https://www.academia.edu/84903599/Summoning_the_Catholic_Church_Turn_to_Just_Peace_.

# Whose side does Jesus take?

## On Israel-Palestine

Jonny Rashid

In 2022, I wrote a book called *Jesus Takes a Side*, and since that time, I have deepened the conviction that I wrote about in the book—namely, that God sides with the oppressed. God not only sides with the oppressed; God becomes one with them. Birthed to a lowly teenager on the outskirts of town, away from the metropole, Jesus incarnates into the world in the literal flesh of oppressed people. God's alignment with oppressed people is categorically clear in scripture and also in the witness of the church. This simple thesis can be used to adjudicate many political conflicts in our polarized time. If this formulation is true, then indeed when it comes to matters of class, race, gender, and ability, it is clear that God sides with the poor, the nonwhite, the nonmale, and the disabled.

After October 7, 2023, I wrote a column about offering empathy to both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some who likely had not read my book beyond the title asked me why I wasn't taking a side in this conflict. Instinctually, and as a matter of my heritage, my heart is with the Arabs and with Palestinians. And by many measures, it is true that the Palestinians are oppressed by Israeli occupation and Western backing. My natural allegiance toward this particular group is based on their material reality as well as my own heritage. But as I will outline below, both groups are categorically oppressed, challenging the thesis of my own book, at least applied simplistically.

### My history

I came of age in an Egyptian-American household in the early 2000s. The most formative event for me and my peace theology was the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. What followed the attacks was the synchronicity of beating war drums and a thirst for vengeance. As an American, I sympathized deeply with the pain we all experienced after the attacks. I may be Egyptian, but I'm also an American, and attacks like that feel deeply personal. That the attackers were Arabs and came from Arab nations made matters worse. Not only was I saddened and burdened

by the attacks themselves as an American, but the people around me were suspicious of my family and myself because of our heritage. No amount of American flags, lapel pins, and bumper stickers could cover up our brown skin and Arab heritage.

As the war drums beat louder, and the United States invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, my heart was tugged in another way. I was watching the country that I call home wage wars, with varying degrees of "justice," on countries filled with people who looked like me and my family. My heart was broken and my body enraged. My own Arab body was deeply disturbed to witness these events. It felt personal, and I took it that way. My empathy for the Arabs whose lives were being destroyed by US weapons was "natural." I empathized, not just because of my burgeoning Christian pacifism but also because I was an Arab too.

Loving my neighbor, as it were, was easy enough to do. As an Arab, during the War on Terror, I found it easy to empathize with Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and self-determination. It seemed like a foregone conclusion to me. The United States was funding Israel, and it felt like the same hammer crushing Iraqis was also crushing Palestinians. However, it turned out that was not an easy conclusion for many Israelis and Jewish people to draw. I want to stretch my own empathy here by focusing on the historic plight of Jewish people. I don't do this to detract from or contradict the oppression of Palestinians—both historically and today—but to hold my own experience of oppression while understanding that of my siblings.

## Jewish history of oppression

For many Jews, it was as easy to sympathize with Jewish people looking for refuge after centuries of bigotry and violence against them in Europe as it was for me to empathize with my Arab counterparts. Any Arab resistance to their presence in the Middle East simply felt like the same experience as before. Looking for safety from oppression is exactly why many Jewish people feel the need to support Israel and take measures to protect it. I am embarrassed to say that was not a conclusion that was readily apparent to me before I listened to my Jewish peers.

In the midst of this struggle between oppressed groups—in many ways pitted against each other by forces greater than they are—I think outsiders in particular should feel mutual empathy and conflict. Although my own biases and proclivities lead me to a natural affinity to Palestinians, it is incumbent on me to demonstrate empathy to all oppressed groups, and

by any definition, Jewish people are very much oppressed. Jewish people have been systemically oppressed in Europe, at the hands of Christians, for thousands of years. Rome conquered Judea in 63 BCE. The occupation of Judea is the context in which all of Jesus's anti-imperial messages are birthed. The tensions between Rome and Jews culminated in the Great Jewish Revolt, where Rome destroyed the Second Temple. It was an apocalyptic event for Jewish people in the region. For Christians, we remember it as the subject of the Olivet Discourses in the Synoptic Gospels. That event, in 70 CE, is indeed the end of the world for Jewish folks. By the 130s, the Bar Kochba Revolt was the final attempt by Jews to reclaim Judea, but Romans killed, enslaved, or exiled those living in Judea, and the Jewish diaspora began again.[1] The diasporic Jews ended up back in what was then Babylon, specifically in Iraq, under the Sasanian Empire.[2]

**By any definition, Jewish people are very much oppressed.**

After Constantine converted Rome, the killer of Jesus, to Christianity, a new narrative formed to burden Jews with the death of Jesus. Christian antisemitism is rooted fundamentally in the Christianization of Rome. Pogroms and attempts at extermination followed, especially surrounding Holy Week. European antisemitism would be completely relentless following this change. The Crusades are among the bloodiest examples of this antisemitism. Ten thousand Jews were slaughtered by French and German forces in the Rhineland in 1096. Jews were local and were targeted more than Muslims (who were distant).[3] Jews were targeted in England in the late 1100s and during the Black Death in the mid-1300s. They were accused of killing Christian children, rumors termed "blood libels." Jews were even blamed for the Black Death, and nearly 510 Jewish communities were destroyed.[4] In 1492, the monarchs of Spain expelled all Jews from the country, and they moved to North Africa, Italy, Turkey, Greece, the Netherlands, Syria, and the Land of Israel. By the 1500s, many Jews lived in what is now Israel-Palestine, and then the Ottoman Empire.[5] In

1 Danya Ruttenberg, "The Antisemitism Post (tm)," *Life Is a Sacred Text*, April 15, 2024, https://www.lifeisasacredtext.com/the-antisemitism-post/

2 Danya Ruttenberg, "The Big Big Mega History Text History Post," *Life Is A Sacred Text*, October 2, 2023, https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/the-big-big-mega-history-text-history.

3 Ruttenberg, "Big Big Mega History."

4 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

5 Ruttenberg, "Big Big Mega History."

the late 1700s and early 1800s, Jews began to assimilate into European German culture and, through the Reformation movement, became a part of secular life in Europe. But in Europe overall, Jews had to mark themselves with a distinct star or badge until the nineteenth century.[6]

## Jewish stereotypes

The oppressive circumstances described above created stereotypes about Jewish people, including the idea that they were greedy. The fact is that they could not own land in a lot of Europe, they had to pay taxes, and so they were forced into poverty and needed income to survive. Because usury is forbidden in Christianity—and in Catholicism specifically—Jews ended up fulfilling the roles of bankers (a question of moral application of the commandments against usury for Christians). Jewish banking was just a matter of material circumstances. Jews lent money, collected rent, and ran businesses from their oppressed urban neighborhoods (ghettos). The moneylenders were not a majority of Jews, yet Christians accused Jews of being greedy cheaters, likening them to the money changers in the Gospels that Jesus threw out of the Temple.[7] The polemic that existed between Jews and Christian Jews in the New Testament, in particular, was used to further activate antisemitism. The polemic was not, strictly speaking, antisemitic at the time of composition largely because it was a conversation contained within the Jewish community, but it became antisemitic when Christianity grew and collected power and weaponized that polemic against Jews. For European Christians, Jews became the crucifixion of Jesus, greedy bankers, and scapegoats for even things like diseases and epidemics. (Sympathetic American readers should be able to see parallels to stereotypes about other minorities in the United States.)

Matters got worse when pressure against the Russian Czar was growing, and his secret service created the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This propagandistic text blamed Jews for international problems, claiming they secretly controlled the world's economy and media.[8] Meanwhile, Jews in Russia and Ukraine continued to face extermination and deportation.

This treatment and stereotyping of Jews led to the German pogroms. Ninety-one Jews were killed during Kristallnacht, and thirty thousand Jews were incarcerated in concentration camps. This led to the Final Solu-

6 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

7 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

8 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

tion and the Holocaust, which included the killing of 90 percent of Polish Jews and two-thirds of the Jewish population. To give us a frame of reference about Jewish extermination and displacement, in 1939, there were 9.5 million Jews living in Europe. By the end of World War II, after six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, that number shrank to 3.8 million. By 1960, the European Jewish population declined to 3.2 million; by 1990, it was 2 million; and today, it is just 1.4 million. Europe used to be home to 57 percent of Jews, and now it is home to merely 10 percent of them. This drastic population reduction is directly related to oppression, displacement, and extermination. And Jews have been oppressed and displaced not only in Europe but also in their diasporic locations.

All of the stereotypes about Jews still exist and cause harm, and they are largely ignored. Whether it is the Jewish characterization of goblins in *Harry Potter*, who serve as bankers in J. K. Rowling's story, or the idea that pro-Israel lobbyists are more powerful than their counterparts, Jews are still stereotyped as monied, greedy, and controlling.

## Palestinian history of oppression

It is within this long context of oppression that I must meet my Jewish siblings. Theirs, much like my own, is a history of hatred, oppression, and violence. I deeply sympathize with a desire for safety, for a place to call home, for a place to raise our children and to live in peace. I can understand why, despite the variety of political circumstances that led to its creation, many Jews support the state of Israel and want to defend it. I can also understand why they would support measures to keep them safe, including the current war in Gaza. So I empathize with the need for safety and for the desire to protect that safety when it feels threatened. (It is also for this reason that I empathize with Palestinian resistance.)

Unfortunately, Israel's leaders aren't just looking for a homeland and safety, and because they have the backing of Western military power and strength, they have power over Palestinians. The war in Gaza is about more than just protecting Jewish people; it is about exterminating Gazans and Gaza. We know this because of the rhetoric of Benjamin Netanyahu's government and also because of their policies that have led to over forty thousand deaths of Palestinians. Moreover, we know this because of the history of oppression of Palestinians in that region.

Between 1947 and 1949, 750,000 Palestinians became refugees, as Israeli forces took nearly 78 percent of Palestinian land. They destroyed over five hundred villages and cities and killed 15,000 Palestinians. Thirty

to forty thousand Palestinians were internally displaced, and Israel forbade them from returning home.

Some argue that the nation of Israel was founded not merely to protect Jewish people but rather on a principle of Jewish supremacy and nationalism. While I think the merits of this abstract argument can be debated, what cannot be is the massive support from the West that Israel receives, garnering it the oppressor in the conflict between these two genuinely and historically oppressed groups. Palestinians continued to be expelled into Gaza and the West Bank. In 1967, during the Arab-Israeli War, Israel began occupying all the remaining Palestinian territories (East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip). And they still occupy them today. The UN's partition plan gave Israel 55 percent of Palestine, but today it occupies 85 percent. Palestinians live in conditions that have been described as apartheid. They have a forced minority status. There are nearly eight million Palestinian refugees that cannot return to their original homes.[9]

I will not defend the often extreme and antisemitic rhetoric heard in the Middle East and even in Palestine. Sometimes the thirst for extermination exists in Palestinian rhetoric as well. The distinguishing factor is rooted in the power to oppress and use force. We can decry the violence on both sides, but the reason Israel is scrutinized as the oppressor is primarily because of the support the United States offers it. This is not a uniquely Israeli problem; it is one centered on American militarism and foreign interest.

While many Jewish people want safety and a homeland, the US interest, especially when framed with Christian Zionist support, shows us that the matters at hand are about Western interests, in particular, not Jewish livelihood of safety. But the pain of oppressed people can be exploited for the benefit of an oppressor promising them protection. That is what I believe is happening with the Western support of Israel.

## A shared history of oppression

The violence on both sides does not make the region safe for either Palestinians or Israelis. It is in the interest of both Palestinians and Israelis to live peaceably with one another. So while I empathize with resistance on

9 "The Nakba did not start or end in 1948," *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/5/23/the-nakba-did-not-start-or-end-in-1948.

both sides, and even the hostility toward the other, I do not think it is the ultimate posture we should take, even as victims of oppression.

If the oppressed act like the oppressor once they gain political power, they repeat the cycle of violence and oppression. A group of people who were victims of pogroms and genocides in Europe and displacement all over the world should empathize with Palestinians going through the same thing right now instead of perpetrating the same evil on them.

The shared history of oppression of both Jews and Palestinians should act as a uniting force. It should create solidarity, neighborly love, resistance to the same things happening again, and resistance to perpetrating them on one another.

It is essential that we begin this pursuit of cooperation by listening to and learning from one another. As an Arab, I continue to long to learn from the history of Jewish oppression because I also want my own history of oppression to be understood. I often think this empathy, in the heat of war and hostility, is forgotten—understandably, I am in a privileged position to be able to pause and consider. And with deep histories of pain on both sides, with an endless cycle of violence and counterviolence, such a pause for consideration seems impossible.

That is all the more reason to stop the war now before a side declares victory. We need to create more space for mutual understanding and healing, and that cannot happen if a US-backed war for domination continues.

We want to cooperate with other oppressed groups and stand in solidarity against oppression everywhere. This is true in my example of Israel-Palestine, but it is also true across all oppressed groups, both in small and large contexts. Rather than competing for power among one another, we can share power and build unity. Learning of the history of oppression that binds us together helps us see the mutual desires we all have for liberation. Violence and counterviolence do the opposite. It keeps us from seeing one another, and that is why it is a valuable tool for those in power to stay in power. But another way is possible.

## About the author

Jonny Rashid is pastor of West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship and the author of *Jesus Takes a Side* (Herald Press, 2022).

# The work of welcome in the wake of war

## The story of Neighbor to Neighbor

Andrea Cramer

After growing up in a Christian community where support for the US military and its global dominance was assumed, I became drawn to nonviolence in my mid-twenties through exposure to Anabaptist thought. Initially, I thought of nonviolence in terms of what I was against: the physical violence and terror of war. Putting nonviolence into practice meant expressing my disapproval of the military industrial complex. But through my encounters with refugees and asylum seekers, I have been challenged to think of nonviolence not only as what I am against but also as what I am for, not only *how to resist war* but also *what to do in the wake of war*. Below I tell the story of how I came to found the non-profit organization Neighbor to Neighbor after encountering those displaced by violence, followed by an account of how Neighbor to Neighbor welcomes those fleeing violence into our community. But, first, it is necessary to describe what those seeking refuge and asylum in the United States are up against.

### The plight of refugees and asylum seekers

The Refugee Act of 1980, signed into law by US President Jimmy Carter, established a permanent system for the admission and resettlement of refugees into the United States and provided a uniform definition of the term *refugee* as a person who is "unable or unwilling" to return to their home country of origin "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." In 1982, US President Ronald Reagan set the ceiling for the annual number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States at 140,000. While the number of displaced persons worldwide has increased, the number of resettled refugees to the United States has decreased since that 1982 ceiling. During his first administration, President Donald Trump reduced the ceiling for refugees admitted to the United States to a record low of 15,000 for fiscal year

2021. While President Joe Biden increased the ceiling back up to 125,000, it was difficult to reverse the effects of Trump's reduction on the actual number of refugees admitted. Moreover, Trump's starkly xenophobic rhetoric during his 2024 campaign suggests that he will once again severely reduce the ceiling. Currently, the United States only resettles around .0001 percent of displaced persons worldwide.[1]

**Currently, the United States only resettles around .0001 percent of displaced persons worldwide.**

Along with refugees, who are granted rights and protections before resettling in another country, are asylum seekers, who enter another country to seek protection, sanctuary, or asylum. In the United States, the process of being granted asylum can take years, as it requires establishing probable fear; undergoing extensive background checks with Homeland Security, the FBI, National Counterterrorism Center, and the State Department; and successfully working one's way through a string of court hearings and interviews.

As of May 2024, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that 120 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, representing one in every sixty-nine people. This is the twelfth consecutive annual increase in the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict, persecution, human rights violations, and instability. The number of displaced people includes 43.4 million refugees and 6.9 million asylum seekers, along with another 63.3 million people who have been internally displaced.

Each phase of the displacement and resettlement process—preflight, flight, and postflight—comes with its own challenges. The preflight phase is the experience of war, conflict, or discrimination. The flight phase is the process of displacement, often just as dangerous and traumatizing as the conflict itself. The postflight phase involves resettlement in a new, safer place. While the postflight phase brings protection from the violence that led to displacement, it often comes with new feelings of isolation, depression, and resentment. Just as there is work for peacebuilders to address the root causes of displacement, so too there is much peacebuilding work to be done in this postflight phase. The work is our focus at Neigh-

1 For more information about these numbers, see Diana Roy, Claire Klobucista, and James McBride, "How Does the U.S. Refugee System Work?," Council on Foreign Relations, March 26, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work-trump-biden-afghanistan.

bor to Neighbor, which arose from a growing awareness of the plight of those in this phase.

## How Neighbor to Neighbor came to be

In 2011, Texas experienced its hottest, driest summer ever recorded—the same summer that my family moved from Northern Indiana to Waco, Texas, where my husband was starting a graduate program at Baylor University. Walking out to the mailbox and back was an act of bravery. I would be winded and sweating by the time I reached the front door, just to be burnt by the door handle. The steering wheel of our car would be gummy and soft. My laundry could dry outside in minutes. There were many days that I questioned our move. We didn't know a single soul, and we had an almost two-year-old son and a baby daughter on the way. And, for the first time in my life, I felt like a stranger in a strange place.

It wasn't until I met a fellow Midwesterner at the Mennonite church we started attending—Hope Fellowship—that I was able to imagine this place becoming home. This Midwesterner taught me important tips and tricks for surviving the hot Texas summer: run your errands before 9:00 a.m., take a cooler with you to the grocery store, be wary of fire ants. This friend, and eventually many other new friends, extended welcome to me in a time and a place where I felt alone and uncertain. These relationships gave me a sense of belonging and peace.

A couple of years into our time in Waco, my son—who was then four years old—found a magazine we had lying around the house. In it was a spread of profile pictures of Afghan refugee children taken by photographer Muhammed Muheisen.[2] Intrigued, my son began asking me questions. *Who are these kids? What's a refugee? How do people become refugees? What can we do to help?* I answered him as best as I could, realizing there were some major gaps in my knowledge of the issue. We, mother and son, wept together and started brainstorming how we could get involved. I started a deep dive on forced displacement and human migration. This was when the Syrian conflict was regularly making the news in the United States. The plight of Syrian refugees trying to escape by inflatable rafts across the Mediterranean became all I could think about. My son started designing and painting T-shirts to sell to donate the proceeds to local

2 See his and his wife's non-profit the Everyday Refugees Foundation at https://everydayrefugees.org.

refugee resettlement agencies. Later, he and our daughter hand stamped Christmas cards for the same purpose.

In the summer of 2014, we learned of the thousands of people crossing the Mexico-Texas border, seeking asylum from the violence in their home countries in the Northern Triangle: Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. We learned of organizations doing relief work with the migrants on the border and called one such organization, Catholic Charities in McAllen, Texas, to see if it would be helpful for a small, young family to volunteer for a few days. They welcomed our help, so we packed a van full of donations and drove six hours to the border. This was our first direct interaction with newcomers, and the experience helped solidify the realization that I had been slowly coming to: I wanted to dedicate myself to the work of welcome.

After our time in Waco, we returned to South Bend, Indiana. South Bend has a history of refugee resettlement, but when we moved back, the work had become unofficial, ad hoc assistance. After a year surveying the needs in the community, I decided to start a non-profit to provide welcome and friendship to refugees and asylum seekers who found their way to our community. With a board of directors in place, I filed for a 501(c)3 nonprofit status, and in December 2017, Neighbor to Neighbor was born.[3]

## The work of welcome at Neighbor to Neighbor

The mission of Neighbor to Neighbor is to foster mutual relationships between newcomers and local community members in order to empower newcomers and engage community members through friendships, education, and advocacy.

Intercultural friendships are the backbone of Neighbor to Neighbor. We build community through the art of neighboring and connecting newcomer immigrants with local community members. We strive for friendships that are mutual, hospitable, and listening. We want to help our newcomer population navigate the new set of challenges they will face living in the South Bend area: getting a city ID and library card, learning the tax system, writing resumes, seeking sustainable employment, learning English, finding community events, and feeling comfortable in our community.

3 Learn more about Neighbor to Neighbor at n2nsb.org.

We also provide education to the local community through onboarding and training volunteers and hosting and promoting events to raise awareness of issues related to forced migration. In addition, we provide educational opportunities for newcomers, including English acquisition and topical workshops. We strive for education that is non-judgmental, practical, and empowering. We value the passions and creativity of all—young, old, and everyone in between. Involving everyone, even at a young age, teaches that we can all be welcoming, and anyone can join a movement for change.

**The mission of Neighbor to Neighbor is to foster mutual relationships between newcomers and local community members.**

Finally, we strive for advocacy that is engaged, focused, and effective. When we learn of systems and structures that create barriers for our newcomer neighbors, we take action. Within our first year, we noticed that a major barrier was the knowledge exam required to receive a driver's license. In Indiana, the knowledge exam is offered in fourteen languages. However, when helping one of our first newcomers study for this test, I discovered that the manual to study for the test was only in English. Many people come to the United States having driven for many years in their home country. They are confident, good drivers. But because they are not yet proficient in written English, the study manual creates a barrier to gain a driver's license, which in turn hinders their independence and ability to gain employment.

Neighbor to Neighbor reached out to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to see if anything could be done. They responded that we had a case based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So with the help of the ACLU, we asked the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) to provide driver's manuals in more languages than English. After a few months, we came to a settlement, and the manual can now be accessed in eleven languages. We later learned that the BMV had wanted to make this happen, but they needed outside pressure to show that it was a need that was worth the cost of the translation. In the end, members from the BMV thanked us for our advocacy.

## Welcome in the wake of war

In February 2020, then US President Donald Trump signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, which included a complete withdrawal of all US

military forces within fourteen months of the agreement. The following year, then US President Joe Biden delayed the date of withdrawal but ultimately stuck to the agreement. The US military, which had been a presence in Afghanistan for twenty years, withdrew its last troops by August 30, 2021, as the Taliban had already retaken control of Kabul and most of the country. Suddenly, those Afghan nationals who had assisted the US military, along with their families, were threatened with retribution.

Of those who were able to get out of Afghanistan and seek asylum in the United States, around seventy of them were relocated to South Bend. In the wake of this crisis, two resettlement agencies reopened in South Bend after being closed for ten years. As these agencies were trying to rebuild, we were able to place volunteer teams with several of the Afghan families right away since we already had our infrastructure in place.

One of the families we worked with was the family of Ali.[4] Ali is in his late thirties and so lived with the presence of the US military since he was a teenager. As soon as he was able, he enlisted to serve alongside the United States as an interpreter and a medic. When the Afghan government fell, he, along with his wife and seven children, fled the country. By the time they arrived in South Bend, they were shell-shocked. In addition to trying to process the traumatic events of their lives, they now faced a cost of living that was exponentially more than they ever experienced, socially progressive people that dressed differently and interacted across genders loosely, a strange new language, household appliances that they had never seen, and more. They were thankful that they were safe and that they had each other, but their trusted circle did not go beyond their family.

**When the Afghan government fell, he, along with his wife and seven children, fled the country. By the time they arrived to South Bend, they were shell shocked.**

After a couple of months, Ali began a full-time job, the kids were enrolled in and started school, and, as often happens, Ali's wife Myriam was isolated at home. Neighbor to Neighbor put together a volunteer team that started to meet with the family regularly, usually socializing over cups of Afghan tea and disjointed conversations. Eventually Neighbor to Neighbor launched a program for Afghan women that meets weekly to offer an English lesson and a private story hour for the women and preschool-aged

4 Names have been changed for privacy and protection.

children. This program allowed the newly arrived Afghan women to meet each other for the first time since transportation caused barriers to doing so previously. Over the three years that Ali and his family have been here, they have had another baby (a US citizen!), their oldest child was able to get a driver's license and is on track to graduate from high school this year, the younger children have become fluent in English, and Myriam and their oldest daughter have started learning to drive—something that seemed unimaginable before. While there are still everyday difficulties and sadness for their homeland, we celebrate with them and their ever-growing network of friends for all that they have accomplished.

## Conclusion

As I reflect on my journey, I can't help but be amazed at all the people that have led to and allowed for this work of peacebuilding. If the photographer Muhammad Muheisen hadn't cared about and photographed those fleeing war, his photos of Afghan refugee children would never have found their way into my child's hands. If my child hadn't been curious and empathetic, he wouldn't have asked me those simple, yet challenging questions. If Catholic Charities in McAllen, Texas, hadn't welcomed a young family to volunteer, we wouldn't have caught a vision for postflight relief work. If hundreds of South Bend residents hadn't caught that vision with Neighbor to Neighbor, we couldn't have connected with all the hundreds of newcomers that have relocated to our community.

True peace, full peace requires attention to the post-war, postflight landscape. In the wake of war, I have found a space to practice the beautiful, messy, complex work of welcome. My life has been enriched by the many friendships that I have been able to build with people from all over the world. One such friend told me recently, "When we arrived we didn't know anyone here. But we didn't feel that we were alone." This is what the work of welcome—the work of peacebuilding—in the wake of war is all about.

## About the author

Andrea Cramer is founder and executive director of Neighbor to Neighbor, a post-resettlement non-profit in South Bend, Indiana. She is a candidate in the Master of Arts in Theology and Peace Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She lives in South Bend with her husband and two teenage children.

# Following Jesus in Jerusalem

## A sermon for Peace Sunday

Kevin Derksen

> *But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us. (Eph. 2:13–14)*

We come to Peace Sunday against the backdrop of war.[1] Alongside the countless other protracted conflicts, invasions, and civil wars playing around the world, our attention has been daily tuned to Israel and Palestine. Our prayers have circled around hostages and slaughtered families and the retribution being exacted by ground assaults and the pummeling of whole cities and populations. And we wonder how we can talk about peace when there is no peace.

### Acts 15

On this Peace Sunday, we pause at the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. Acts is a narrative that tells the story of emerging Jesus communities in decidedly complicated times. And it's a narrative that is plenty familiar with the mingled realities of religious and political conflict. At the Jerusalem Council, leaders in the early Christian movement gather for a critical moment of discernment and decision-making around what it means to be a community of Jesus followers in this new age of the Spirit.

I've participated in my fair share of church conferences over the years, and I suspect some of you have attended many more than I. So perhaps you can imagine the setting for what was playing out here in Jerusalem. A lot of mingling and greeting, a lot of hugs and reunions. Some folks are working the room, while others who are less connected are feeling a bit awkward and settling into the corners clinging to the first-century equivalent of coffee cups and Danishes from the reception table. There is some inspiring worship—songs, scriptures, sermons, and greetings. And then, at a certain point, the business session begins. Maybe a few formalities and

1 Originally preached at Bethel Mennonite Church on November 12, 2023.

softball issues are cleared out of the way before the pressing agenda makes it on the table. And if it's anything like the church conferences I've been to, it's a mixed bag of important conversation and wasted opportunity.

The agenda item in this Jerusalem conference began back in Antioch. This is where Saul and Barnabas had spent quite a bit of time ministering among the cultural Greek population such that the city had become home to an emerging faith community of both Jews and Gentiles together. So it caused a serious commotion when a group of Jewish Christians came to Antioch telling these Greek folks that they needed to take on all the traditional requirements of Jewish religious life if they wanted to be followers of Jesus. Paul and Barnabas disagreed, and some pointed discussions were had in Antioch.

**Even from our perspective so far removed from the historical and cultural context of Acts 15, we can see that the stakes are high.**

Even from our perspective so far removed from the historical and cultural context of Acts 15, we can see that the stakes are high. There are major theological questions here about what Jesus had done and what it would mean to live as his disciples in light of his death and resurrection. But there are also some thorny practical considerations. It's no small thing to take on the traditions of Moses, particularly for folks who haven't learned them from childhood. And perhaps thorniest of all, the traditions of Moses would include circumcision. So we can understand why the Gentile believers in Antioch are holding their breath as this argument played out. These sharp discussions have the potential for some rather sharp implications!

Eventually, it is decided that this local issue needs some broader discussion. And so Paul and Barnabas head off with some others to Jerusalem, where the coffee and the Danishes are waiting. Jerusalem is where many of the earliest apostles had remained as de facto leaders of the emerging church. They were the Jewish inner-circle around Jesus, and so there is no guarantee how this discussion will go. We might wonder if the Jewish Christians who had come to Antioch in the first place might themselves have come from Jerusalem. And certainly when Paul and Barnabas arrive, they are met right away by more from this same camp. It's a setup that doesn't bode well for their cause.

The text describes much discussion at this point, and I can imagine the proceedings starting to spin and lose traction in the mire of compet-

ing perspectives. But then Peter starts to speak, and something shifts in the room. He shares an impassioned plea not to burden these new Greek believers with additional requirements. The room falls silent. With this encouragement from Peter, Paul and Barnabas then take their turn sharing stories of what God had been doing among the Gentile communities they had met on their travels. Finally, James—who had become something of a leader to the whole movement—stands up. He reflects on what he's heard and draws from the scriptures to affirm with Peter and Paul and Barnabas that there should be no additional requirements made of Gentiles who are turning to God. They should be counselled to avoid a few key things, like meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. But otherwise, they should be free to join the community of Jesus followers without taking on the rest of the Jewish religious traditions.

The delegate body at this conference seems to be on board by this point, and the whole Jerusalem church agrees to send a couple of their people back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to deliver a letter written to the Greek believers there. The letter outlines this perhaps surprising but welcome affirmation that the believers in Antioch could follow Jesus without additional requirements of adherence to Jewish law. The relief is palpable among the Antioch crowd when this letter is read—as one can imagine given that they were otherwise going to be facing a tough test of commitment to their newfound faith. And the Jerusalem envoy returns home bearing greetings of peace from far-off people now accounted as sisters and brothers in Christ.

## Ephesians 2

I think we can see the Jerusalem Council as a practical outworking of what Paul says in Ephesians 2: that now, in Jesus Christ, the wall has come down. The barrier of hostility that separated God's chosen people from all others has been broken. "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (Eph. 2:15).

For Paul, a core affirmation of the gospel—perhaps *the* core affirmation of the gospel—is this making of peace where there once was division. It's a breaking down of barriers and hostility. This is the good news: that there is no longer an inside and an outside, a near and a far-off. There are no longer borders; there is no longer a wall. There is no longer enmity, suspicion, anger, and fear. There is no longer violence across the chasms

of religious tradition. There is no longer me and you; there is now simply "us" in Christ as we come through one Spirit to our God.

It is hard to hear a story about Jerusalem without thinking also about hostages, attacks, and the living hell being rained down on the Gaza Strip. And on a Peace Sunday, it is perhaps impossible. I think this is appropriate. What is playing out in Israel and Gaza today is deeply entwined with the church's historical failure to live up to the good news that got Paul so excited in Ephesians 2. The good news that sent a delegation from Antioch back to Jerusalem with greetings of peace. On Peace Sunday, we must add to our prayers and laments a confession of the devastating effects that both Christian antisemitism and Christian Islamophobia have had past and present.

**It is hard to hear a story about Jerusalem without thinking also about hostages, attacks, and the living hell being rained down on the Gaza Strip.**

The whole Jerusalem Council was necessary because in the early days it simply was not at all clear that what it meant to be part of this new community of Jesus followers was something other than being faithfully Jewish—as Jesus himself was. It was a live question and not a foregone conclusion, so close were and are the connections between the story of the Hebrew people and the good news of Jesus. Do new converts to the Way need to become Jewish and follow the law of Moses? Even as the Jerusalem Council answered no, this was not intended to mark a break. It was not intended to create a new wall or division. As Paul says in Ephesians, precisely the opposite is happening here: not a new dividing wall, not a new Christian "us" to place over against "them," but a new peace through the cross that puts to death the enmity between us.

When Paul talks about Christ proclaiming the good news of peace to those far off and to those near, it's the Gentiles who he sees as far off. We're the ones who are being drawn closer into something that has already been at work for generations. We are the guests to this tradition, the gracious recipients grafted onto a faithful root. We are the ones who get to be part of this story by the pure and amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

And yet the history of Christianity is in so many places a history of enmity toward the Jewish people. A history of prejudice and persecution. A history of dividing walls and ghettoization. A history of scapegoating and violence that in the twentieth century found expression in an unspeakable holocaust. The origins of the current state of Israel are complicated,

but its roots are all over tangled up with this history—with our history as the Christian church in so many times and places. So as war rages on, we lament and confess how far short we have fallen from Paul's vision of barriers broken and hostilities ended with those whose ancient faith we now claim as our own.

In the same moment, we also must acknowledge the Christian racism and Islamophobia that has fueled the politics of the Middle East for decades. The cries of Palestinian people for justice have so often gone unheard in the West. Their stories of displacement and occupation, of villages razed and homes destroyed, of dividing walls and illegal settler encroachment, of unequal access to resources and water, of blockades and controlled movement, of the open-air prison in the Gaza Strip that produces ever more angry young extremists with little to live for and nothing to lose. Our faith is entwined here, too, buttressing policies of injustice that must give us pause as people of peace.

And yet, our faith is also entwined in the struggle for justice and peace that is continuing to play out in this land. Easily forgotten in the crisis and the chaos is that this ground on which Jesus walked and the first elders and apostles conferenced has remained a home for communities of Jesus followers ever since. The Palestinian Christian community is a small but vibrant presence here—and one that in many places has become an important voice for Palestinian justice and liberation. In the face of ongoing oppression, crisis, and conflict, many Palestinian Christians have found common cause in this witness for justice in the land. It should be no surprise that the Jesus of the Gospels began to resonate with occupied Palestinian believers in a unique way. He was a fellow Palestinian living under occupation in a complex religious and political environment.

In the early 1990s, a specifically Palestinian liberation theology began to crystalize as ecumenical partners from Christian communities of all kinds gathered to reckon with what it means to be followers of Jesus in a context of injustice and oppression. Naim Ateek is an Anglican priest and one of the founders of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem. Here's how he describes this development:

> *For most of our Palestinian people, including Christians, the predominant understanding of liberation involved armed struggle. The word Liberation was pregnant with military and violent connotations. . . . Palestinian liberation theology brought a new understanding to the struggle. True liberation can be*

> *achieved more holistically and authentically through nonviolent struggle. . . . For us, walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and using his nonviolent methods can make a difference in spite of the thorns and hurdles along the road. . . .*
>
> *Indeed, it is right to resist the evil of the illegal occupation of our country and to pursue peace and liberation for all the people of our land—Muslims, Jews and Christians. We must work for the liberation of the oppressors as well as the liberation of the oppressed. . . . With the emergence of Palestinian liberation theology, the prophetic word of peace and justice was again heard in Jerusalem and throughout the land.*[2]

This prophetic word stretches back at least to Paul's own proclamation of the gospel in a time when Jerusalem was already a place for the church to gather and discern together: "so he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Eph 2:17).

In 2007 a Palestinian woman named Manal Hreib wrote the lyrics to a new song as she prepared for a peace event in Nazareth marking both the Palestinian "Nakba"—the day to mourn the loss of Palestinian land—and the Israeli Day of Independence to mark the formation of the State of Israel. She wrote the text in both Arabic and Hebrew. These lyrics were then set to music by a Jewish Israeli woman, Daphne Rosenberg, who also translated the text into English. This event in Nazareth saw groups of Israelis and Palestinians dancing and singing the song together in all three languages.

We have this song in the *Voices Together* hymnal as "Between Darkness and Light" (808). I close by sharing this simple refrain, both a lament and a prayer for hope as we continue to hold the grief and the loss of our troubled world.

> *Between darkness and light I will always walk*
> *And wherever I will go,*
> *I will open a window of light, and will plant the seeds of love.*
> *I will open a window of light, and will plant the seeds of love.*

## About the author

Kevin Derksen is a pastor at the Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

2 Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 2017), 4–5.

# Survival pieces

## Mennonites, trauma, and musical family histories

Anneli Loepp Thiessen and Ingrid Loepp Thiessen

*My daughter sits down at the piano. She gently places her hands on the keys, draws a deep breath, and closes her eyes as she begins to play. The melody spills out over the congregation, a healing balm. They catch their breath, yes this is our song, we hoped we would sing it.*

*My other daughter stands to lead the song. She sees us, inhales courage, closes her eyes, and begins to pray the first verse solo: "So nimm denn meine Hände, und führe mich" (O take my hands and lead me). It is courageous, reverent, beautiful. The singing, the playing, is inspired, a holy moment in tribute to Oma, my Mom, whose life we are celebrating.*

*"Bis an mein selig Ende und ewiglich" (Until my blessed ending and forever). Mom has died, she is at peace. All the trauma, the terror, the destruction of war and sadness that invaded her early life, is un-remembered. Forever.*

*"Ich kann allein nicht gehen, nicht einen Schritt" (I cannot go it alone, not one single step). How often I have sung these words, yet today they spring from the page. I remember that my mother lost her mother and father at the age of seven, and she kept going. In the grip of grief I, too, need to take a step.*

*"Wo du wirst gehen und stehen, da nimm mich mit" (Where you will go and dwell, take me with you). And I pray, God, in my grief take me to the places where I will see you.*

*–Ingrid, summer 2024*

When approximately eight thousand Russian Mennonite refugees arrived on Canadian shores in the years following World War II, they were accompanied by the trauma of religious persecution, forced involvement in brutal political regimes, and the broader shock of constant displacement from the war. Newcomers were welcomed into Mennonite congregations,

which grew exponentially in the mid-to-late twentieth century. A hallmark of both newcomer communities and those that were more established was four-part singing. For Russian Mennonite refugees, this was a musical lineage that survived the trip across the Atlantic when so many of their beloved people and belongings did not. Traditional hymns sung in German, like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" (*Voices Together* #631), served as a reminder of the homeland and a nostalgic tie to the faith to which they clung. Jean Janzen, a Mennonite hymn writer, describes heart songs like these as a rope that pulls Mennonites through impossible situations: "With a hymn we are actually given something to hold on to, *a kind of survival piece*. . . . When we sing, we use all our bodies. We all lift our lungs; we breathe in and out together; we keep the pitch together. What I am doing with my body connects me with other bodies—even bodies of the past. We sustain the spirits of the past through this physical act of singing."[1] Some of these newcomers to Canada were our parents or grandparents. Each of them arrived on Canada's shores with German heart songs, and these songs were, as Janzen suggests, a "survival piece."

**Traditional hymns like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" served as a reminder of the homeland and a nostalgic tie to the faith to which they clung.**

We write this reflection as a mother-daughter duo, descendants of Russian Mennonite refugees to Canada following World War II. We are keenly aware of the intergenerational trauma that stems from our family's history of religious persecution, forced displacement, and immense loss. Though this is our story, it is only one of countless stories of Mennonite trauma and migration throughout history, around the world, and across racial and ethnic lines. Our story is one of *many* contexts where music has been a survival piece for Mennonites. As we reflect on the role of heart songs—in this case, beloved songs that have ties to our family history—we recognize the ways we continue to use our voices and bodies to identify with our family history. In this short reflection, we consider our family's adoption and use of the hymn "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände," revealing the specific nuances of our family's music history. What do individual family musical histories reveal about Mennonite music, beyond oversim-

1 Marlene Kropf and Kenneth James Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Herald, 2001), 49–50; emphasis added.

plified narratives and stereotypes of "Mennonite music"? How does our family's story of trauma become embodied when we sing heart songs like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände?" We invite others to consider what Mennonite music means to them based on their family's musical lineage, whether their family history includes five hundred years of alignment with Anabaptism, or whether they are the first to explore it.

## Constructing a musical family history

As a qualitative researcher, I (Anneli) am constantly invited to reflect on my own positionality: What internal and external forces shape the way I think about music and about my faith? How does my own family context inform how I interpret what goes on around me? Recognizing that it is impossible to be objective as a researcher, reflecting on positionality invites researchers to name the factors that shape their individual perspectives. As a musician—and specifically a church musician—I can name that my family's church music history deeply shapes the way I interpret congregational music practices around me.

As I dive deeper into my family's musical history, I find myself stepping into a tension. I appreciate the function that Euro-Western hymns have had in defining my family's past. As the grandchild of Canadian refugees at the end of a long line of victims of religious and cultural persecution, I desire acknowledgement of the ways that this German classical music has been a source of religious identity and comfort in the face of discrimination. But as a practitioner and scholar, I find myself advocating for an expansion of what we consider to be Mennonite music. I regularly invite Mennonites not to cling to the white European classical music that defined a Mennonite canon in the past and instead to push forward for a Mennonite sound that acknowledges the breadth of Mennonites around the world.[2] I aspire for us to broaden our conceptualization of Mennonite music and to also elevate forms of Mennonite music beyond the ones embedded in the white European Mennonite story. I believe that these two desires can be held in tandem.

In reflecting on our experience of "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände," we are in part constructing our own musical family history, one that is deeply intertwined with the story of persecution, displacement, and migration. We also recognize the privilege and domination that were often

2 For more on this, see Katie Graber and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Publishing Privileges the Published: An Analysis of Gender, Class, and Race in the Hymnological Feedback Loop," *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 3.

implicit in this story. In naming this, we are in line with methodologies like critical family history that "challenge family historians to construct their histories in the context of social relationships forged through colonization, racism, and other relations of power."[3] In other words, our musical family history needs to be constructed with recognition of the ways that privilege is embedded in the story, even as our ancestors experienced victimization and oppression. For our family, this includes acknowledgement of the realities of religious and ethnic persecution that forced our ancestors to take refuge in Canada. It also recognizes the ways that assimilation into Canadian culture was easier because our family was white and visibly matched the white majority around them: as soon as the first generation of children learned English they looked and sounded like the white majority. Elaine Enns captures this nuance, noting that "settler Mennonites have experienced a complicated mix of persecution and marginalization on one hand but assimilation and privilege on the other."[4] Reflecting on our musical family history serves as an invitation to remember these stories of displacement, to care for the music that accompanied that trauma, and then to use this experience to try to help other Mennonites who have been displaced to remember their musical lineage, too.

## Our journey with "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände"

"So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" has accompanied our family for generations. I (Ingrid) don't remember a time when I did not know this song. I sang it at home and at church. It was in the *First Mennonite Children's Hymnary*, published in Winnipeg in 1960, found on page 189. This self-published volume of 193 songs was meant both to continue a story and to introduce a new story. It gently bridged the gap between English and German. It was used by children whose families had come to Canada either in the 1920s or the late 1940s. We, the hundred or more children at First Mennonite Church, would stumble through the Gothic script, giggling as we confused the "F" with the "S." We waded through our bewilderment, singing the story of our people in tattered German.

The English songs in the *First Mennonite Children's Hymnary* were a nod to the new reality that we, children of refugees, born in Canada, very quickly preferred to sing in English. Interestingly, "So Nimm Denn Meine

3 Christine E. Sleeter, "Critical Family History: Situating Family within Contexts of Power Relationships," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8, no. 1 (2016): 14.

4 Elaine Enns, "Healing Trauma, Decolonizing Memory," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 20, no. 2 (2019): 15.

Hände" appears with English verses interlined in the score, the German verses below. Perhaps this was an attempt to make this precious song more broadly accessible and relevant to the new setting. As a teen I sang the song with the church choir in German, and much later in English.

I have held onto this song for decades: We sang it at my baptism, my wedding, my ordination, the funerals of my parents and my in-laws, and the funeral of our dear great aunt. It has been a source of connection between generations. My mother and I sang this song with her cousin in Germany after hours of hushed conversation where they retold stories of their escape. Tears filled everyone's eyes as we recounted our shared story through the singing of this shared song. My mother-in-law always wanted to hear the third verse: "with thee through night and darkness, I reach the goal." These words were a balm for her soul as she aged. Most recently, while crouching beside my mother's bed, her death imminent, I sang it again in German, rough and raspy. I wanted to offer her these tender words even as I drew strength from them myself. Someday I hope we will sing it at my funeral, in German and in English.

**I have held onto this song for decades.**

I (Anneli) have also sung this song my whole life and easily have the German first verse memorized, a semi-accurate English translation lodged in my head. I associate the song with my grandparents on both sides. My paternal grandparents were Mennonite Brethren, leaving Ukraine and Russia in the 1920s. My maternal grandfather was a born-and-raised Mennonite in Ukraine. My maternal grandmother grew up in a Lutheran home in Ukraine and became Mennonite when she came to Canada in the 1950s where she was warmly adopted by the Mennonite community. When I sing "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände," I feel connected to their stories. I remember their trauma and acknowledge that it has been passed down: it lives in my desire for security in my faith community, in my longing to keep my people and my community close. Their story compels me to sing through periods of fear, doubt, or loneliness; I know that they sang through these moments before me.

There is much that we know about how this song came to be in our family musical lineage. "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" was written by Julie Hausman, a Latvian hymn writer who lived from 1826 to 1901. Like many women hymn writers from her time, she wrote devotional material. This piece in particular found its way to publication when she showed it to a pastor in Berlin named Gustav Knak, who included the piece in a

collection devoted to pieces on stillness and quiet, which was published in 1862.[5] The hymn is included in Mennonite, Lutheran, and Moravian hymnals, and despite what many Mennonites might assume, it is not written by a Mennonite.

While we can't be sure of the hymn's earliest adoption by Mennonites, we know that it was included in German in the 1943 *Gesangbuch* published by the General Conference Mennonite Church in North America, which was all in German and entirely in Gothic script. This would have been the hymnal used by our ancestors when they first arrived in Canada. Interestingly, the hymn is missing from the 1914 hymnal, called *Lobe Den Herren*, likely the last hymnal published in the Mennonite Colonies of Ukraine, possibly published before the song was well known. As mentioned, "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" was also included in the 1960 *First Mennonite Church Children's Hymnary*. The song appears in the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal* (the first Mennonite hymnal to print it in English), where it is in both English and German, though with the English interlined. This language delegation stayed the same in the 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* but changed for the 2020 hymnal *Voices Together* when the German became interlined again (#631). This was an editorial decision for *Voices Together,* with first languages often (though not always) interlined and translations separated. The Intercultural Worship committee for *Voices Together* looked at Russian Mennonite heart songs as a form of intercultural repertoire, material that emerged from non-English speaking communities. For many of these heart songs—like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände"—the German was foregrounded to highlight its origins.

**Embodying a song like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" builds on real and constructed memories to help us sustain our family's story.**

With all that we know of this song, there are many unknowns about its place in our family history. We wonder: Was it sung in 1974 at my (Ingrid's) grandmother's funeral far away in Karaganda, Kazakstan? Had any of our family been part of the singing of this song at the train station in Molotschna, when families bid farewell to one another? Was it spoken under the breath of my grandfathers as they were taken away in the mid-

5 John Richard Watson, "Julie Hausmann," *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* (Canterbury Press, 2013), http://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/j/julie-hausmann.

dle of the night? Or was the prayer instead lost amid the destruction and hatred of war? In pre-war times when my father's family sang on the front porch, was this one of their songs? Did any of them sing it on their trek out of Ukraine? Did my father utter these words as he desperately prayed on a German train in the summer of 1945, terrified because his papers had been stolen? Did my mother cling to these familiar words as she criss-crossed Germany alone in the final months of the war looking for any family at all? Did they sing this song in the little German village church where she finally found work? We will likely never know the answers to these questions, but we trust the fragmented stories that help us understand how this song shaped our family's history. As Janzen eloquently notes, "We sustain the spirits of the past through this physical act of singing." Whether at a funeral, a church service, or in someone's living room, embodying a song like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" builds on real and constructed memories to help us sustain our family's story.

## Conclusion

Trauma lives in our family's musical memory. Trauma also lives in the Mennonite story, far further back than we understand from our own family history and far into the future in ways we cannot yet predict. "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" offers our family a way to sing with the trauma of our family's history, moving from unspoken, unacknowledged pain to a shared, embodied memory of this war-torn past. As we do this, we recognize that this song is only one musical expression of Mennonite trauma. Although Mennonites may think of it as a Mennonite song, "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" has *expansive* meaning beyond Mennonite communities, and it has *particular* meaning in our family story. By understanding this story more deeply, we resist the narrative that there is *one* Mennonite musical history, and we embrace the uniqueness of our family's story.

For us, as with our grandparents and great-grandparents, "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" is a heart song. It holds all the promises and hopes of our family in their hardest hours, searching for some place to call home. It names the uncertainties that were a constant companion, weak hearts (*schwaches Herz*), pain and sorrow (*Schmerz*) and uncertainty for the poor people (*schwaches Kind*) fleeing death and destruction. It promises the presence of God in the midst of it all. When we sing it in German, the language of our forebears, we are telling their story and ours. We did not live through this trauma directly but live with the trauma that has defined our family story. When we sing it in English, we are telling a story

so it won't be forgotten—a story of war and suffering and survival—and we claim that one of the threads of this universal tragedy is ours.

> *As the funeral draws to a close, we open our hymnals again. The piano gently leads, arpeggiating on a D chord, and I draw the bow across the strings of my violin. F#, E, D, slow, restful, almost painful. It was my mother who made sure we got music lessons. Her mother, she reminded us, had played the guitar, but no such opportunity existed for my mom.*
>
> *We begin to sing "Be at Rest once more O my soul"* (Voices Together *#532). My heart aches as I think of my mother gone—and rejoices that finally she is fully at rest. In the mystery of death, she has been set free, embraced by the goodness of God. We sing, "For the Lord has been good to you." Indeed, she saw her family and Canada as signs of God's goodness.*
>
> *This song was written in 2008 by an Anglican songwriter who lives and ministers in Winnipeg, the city where my family settled. My mother has never heard this song, but I'm singing it for her and me. The song is landing in my heart, a new musical memory. It will live beside "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände." It will feed my soul for a long time; perhaps it will feed my family and carry them through whatever is ahead. Whenever I sing it, I will think of her and of our family's story.*
>
> *—Ingrid, summer 2024*

## About the authors

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Ingrid Loepp Thiessen is a spiritual care provider in a long-term care home in Kitchener, Ontario. She is especially passionate about designing worship services that are accessible to people with memory loss and dementia, and she works closely with the palliative care team and the program staff to create a community that is hospitable to aging and death. She is ordained for ministry in the Mennonite Church Eastern Canada and has served in several churches in Ontario. She is a graduate of both Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

# What we need is here

## On finding our way back home

Julian Waldner

In Jesus's most famous parable, a son returns home. He is standing on the dusty road, fearing the worst. He has squandered his father's wealth and wished him dead. But then *comes that moment* so powerfully expressed in the song *Fire and Bone* by the Killers:

> *When I came back empty handed*
> *You were waiting in the road*
> *And you fell on my neck*
> *And you took me back home.*[1]

What we human beings long for more than anything—our most basic human need—is to come home. Home. What does it evoke? Rest. A long-contracted breath released. Tears of relief. Peace. At the heart of so much of our anxious-seeking-pounding-running-desperate-striving—at the heart of it all is a longing for home. This restlessness at the heart of our humanity, this primordial longing for respite, points us home. As Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."[2]

The scriptures tell us that God in Jesus has made his home with us, come to seek and save the homeless (John 1:14). God comes as one scattering seeds, which grow to be large trees giving shelter, shade, and food (Mark 4:26). Jesus invites those who are anxious and weary to come and find rest (Matt. 11:28–30). Against our self-serious attempts to make something of ourselves and the world, Jesus announces, "It is finished" (John 19:30). In Jesus, God's peace has arrived. It is here. Jesus calls us home, into the joy of creation, for look: "the home of God is among mortals" (Rev. 21:3). What we need is here.

1 The Killers, "Fire and Bone," track 6 on *Imploding the Mirage*, Sound City, 2020, Spotify.

2 Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. J. G. Pilkington (Folio Society, 1993), 1:1.

## The homeless fantasy

The most basic human need is for *home*, but our condition in North American technological society is one of *homelessness.* There are many ways this is experienced: the destruction of the natural world and the loss of habitats; the breakdown of rural communities and the disconnection from the land; the loss of cultural belonging and growing individualism; the escape into online bubbles and the Meta-verse. I have no doubt that my generation's struggles with anxiety and depression—42 percent of us have been diagnosed with a mental health condition—are connected with these realities.[3]

Our technological world of power, speed, and efficiency has been constructed by what I call a "homeless fantasy": the fantasy that what we need for a better world always lies in some future fashioned from some Ideal. We buy into this and find ourselves rushed and anxious, out of sorts, and *discontent* with ourselves and the world. How can we find our way back home? What we need is here.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives our prodigal technological selves a roadmap back home. Jesus draws a fundamental contrast between two different ways of being in the world. We must choose, Jesus tells us: we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6:24).

The homeless way of Mammon lives in the future, planning to ensure that the vicissitudes of life turn out in ways that keep the cash flowing. The creation, our creaturely bodies, and imperfect communities must be managed and smoothed out to allow for the free flow of production and consumption. This is not the way of Jesus. He calls us to stop living in the future: the present has enough for us (Matt. 6:34).

Look and see. Look at the geese of the air (Matt. 6:26), look at the birch trees, look at the canola of the field (Matt. 6:28)—in turning our grateful attention to the world, we discover the loving care that undergirds it all, and us. Come into the abundance of the present moment: the breath in our lungs, the soil between our bare feet. Here we find that it as Jesus promised: our heavenly father cares for us. What we need is here.

Jesus tells us "Seek first the kingdom of God": let go of securing outcomes and instead be faithful right now (Matt. 6:33). We work for a good

3 "State of Gen Z Mental Health," *Harmony Healthcare IT*, September 15, 2022, https://www.harmonyhit.com/state-of-gen-z-mental-health/; "On Edge: Understanding and Preventing Young Adults' Mental Health Challenges," Making Caring Common, 2023, https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/on-edge.

future by caring for the good things of creation and culture that we have in the present.[4]

It is part of our homeless fantasy that words like *health*, *support*, and *care* are seen as the prerogative of experts whose services must be purchased to unlock the benefits.[5] Or indeed that *politics* has come to signify nothing more than the turning of a vast bureaucratic machine slightly more in the direction of the misfortunate. These words are not abstractions; their meaning is in our hands.

The work of justice does not lie in the hands of the political machine, the experts, or our anxious attempts to control the future. The work of justice lies close at hand: in our homes, neighbourhoods, farms, and backyards. The place that needs care and attentiveness is around us. The truth that needs to be spoken is not to some distant Pharaoh but to the petty tyrants in our own neighbourhood. The support that our neighbour needs is us. The reconciliation that needs to happen lies in plain view. Christ waits in the guise of the stranger.

## The work of joy

There is no more urgent task in our technological age than the work of *joy*. In a world obsessed with metrics, achievement, production, and performance, we need to return to the joy of finding our humanity in relationship with others. To find our way home, we must once again make our home in the world, in our own bodies, and with each other. The work of peace is the work of homemaking in a homeless world.

Plant a tree. Make a friend. Invite people over. Make something. Read a book. Cook a meal. Raise your own chickens. Pray. Go barefoot. Gaze at the stars. Think about the meaning of life. Love someone. Take a risk.[6] What we need is here.

In Homer's ancient epic, *The Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus is trapped, far from his motherland of Ithaca, on the goddess Calypso's Island. The poem emphasizes the resplendence of the Island—there are sights here "to please even a god"—and yet, here in this utopia, Odysseus is withering

4 Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," in *What are People For?* (North Point, 1990), 178–97.

5 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (Penn State University Press, 2021), 151–70.

6 Julian Waldner, "Gluttony, Fasting and Feasting: Three Approaches to Technology," *Coffee with Kierkegaard*, August 22, 2023, https://coffeewithkierkgaard.home.blog/.

away.[7] Odysseus is homesick: "he / longs to see even just the smoke that rises / from his own homeland and wants to die."[8] The goddess, trying to appease her miserable guest, offers him a choice: Would he like to stay with her and allow her to "set him free from time and death forever"?[9] Or would he like to return to his wife Penelope, even though "mortals can never rival the immortals in beauty"?[10] Calypso's argument seems irrefutable, inarguable—who *wouldn't* choose immortality over finitude and death? And yet, inexplicably, even irrationally, despite her iron-clad logic, Odysseus makes his choice: "*But even so*, I want to go back home."[11] Martha Nusbaum, in her brilliant essay on this story, describes Odysseus's choice as a choice for the joy of his humanity and the vulnerability, boundedness, *and fragile beauty* that this entails. He is choosing, in the words of Nusbaum, "the form of a human life and the possibilities of excellence, love, and achievement that inhabit that form."[12]

The choice expressed here is ours: Will we choose the homeless fantasy of Calypso's Island? Or will we make the risky and arduous journey to return home to the joy of our humanity?

## Finding our way back home

Calypso's Island represents the fantasy that the limits, burdens, and difficulties of our creaturely life can be overcome—that, as L. M. Sacasas puts it, the crooked timbre of our humanity can be straightened.[13] It is the fantasy of a world of ever-growing ease and efficiency that sees our creaturehood as an obstacle to this growth. We buy into this fantasy collectively with our capitalist economy of limitless growth, unchecked by human or ecological concerns. We—I—buy into it personally in a myriad of small ways when we choose consumption over repair and contentment; when we choose "fast" meals over home-cooked feasts; or when we choose isolation over neighbourliness.

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7 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton, 2018), 5.74.

8 Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.55–59.

9 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.136–37.

10 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.213–14.

11 Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.219.

12 Martha Nusbaum, "Transcending Humanity," in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford University Press: 1992), 366.

13 L. M. Sacasas, "Embrace Your Crookedness," *The Convivial Society* 4, no. 13, July 27, 2023, https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/embrace-your-crookedness.

This fantasy is expressed in modern-day versions of the Anabaptist fantasy of a community "without spot or wrinkle"—in our modern iterations, we long for a sense of belonging with people who look and sound as much like us as possible. Like Calypso's offer of a belonging free from the struggle and frustration of real community, our digital tribes offer a polarizing counterfeit of the real thing. However, real community is found not in like-mindedness but in shared weakness.

**Real community is found not in like-mindedness but in shared weakness.**

This came home to me in a profound way in the fall of 2020 when my father tragically and suddenly passed away in a car accident. I still remember standing shell-shocked with my mother as the police officer gave us her condolences. And then, they came trickling in: friends, relatives, and neighbours. People with tears in their eyes, hugs, and theologically suspect clichés. I still remember the moment when the door burst open, and in came one man with whom I had never seen eye to eye. He didn't pause. He came straight at me and wrapped me with a hug so tight that I could barely breathe. I glimpsed in that moment what Jayber Crow saw in Wendell Berry's novel of the same name: a vision of his town, Port William, "imperfect and irresolute," "always disappointed in itself, and disappointing its members," and yet, "somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness."[14]

How do we find our way back home? What we need is here. The work of peace is the work of joyful homemaking: *Care*ful attention to the present. *Faith*ful love to the people and places around us—this is what repairs the world (Matt. 6:24–34). In the words of Wendell Berry, "and we pray" not for some other, better world, community, or place but "to be quiet in heart, / and in eye, / clear. What we need is here."[15]

## About the author

Julian Waldner is a member of the Decker Hutterite Community and a current student at Canadian Mennonite University. On the completion of his degree, he is planning to serve his community as a high school teacher. Julian blogs at *Coffee with Kierkegaard* (https://coffeewithkierkgaard.home.blog/).

14 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoints, 2000), 205.

15 Wendell Berry, "Wild Geese," from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Counterpoints, 1998), 90.

# Prayers about War

Carol Penner

### How big is God?

God, you've seen all that we do under the sun.
Everything done in darkness is clear to you.
When we kill each other at arm's length,
the blood is on our hands.
And so we prefer the slingshot, the arrow:
we see and hear the body fall,
but our hands are cleaner.
Our weapons get harder and faster:
catapults give way to cannonballs,
the musket morphs into the AK47,
the squinting eye becomes laser telescopes.
You know our passion for long distance killing.
We drop bombs from above the clouds
and entire cities evaporate
without us hearing a sound.
But even that's not enough for us.
Now we create missiles that explode
half a world away with the push of a button.
Not satisfied, we plan and plot
for platoons of robot soldiers, row on row.
We will set them loose and wait.
The blood of our victims
cries out from the ground,
and our killing machines
will have no ears to hear.
O Jesus, make it stop.

God of angel armies,
can you conquer our warring hearts?
Can you vanquish the human war machine?
Are you big enough to dismantle
the military industrial complex?

We need peace like a virus
that inserts itself in our very bodies;
serenity and compassion
replicating at the cellular level.
A pandemic of peacefulness falling upon us,
taking away our appetite for war,
opening our eyes and ears
to our mutual aching vulnerabilities.
Can we, like the angels, greet each other
with the message, "Fear not"?
Spirit of hope, brooding over our deep
and compulsive desires to kill each other,
cement in us visions of a world
healed beyond our wildest dreams.

## God's remedy

You are the God who sees.
You see the victims of war,
and you bring them to us.
We turn on the news and they are there.
We go to the farthest reaches
of our social media feed
and they are ever before us.
You carry them to our borders as refugees,
hollow-eyed people with no tears left.
They come with almost nothing,
having left even hope behind.
What they carry is the weight
of indelible memories;
loved ones torn away,
bodies in the streets,
hungry children and no food.
They have seen and done things to survive
they could not have imagined,
and which they cannot express.
They have been transformed by terror.
They know in their bones
that community and decency
are ephemeral.

Walking survivors of hell on earth,
they are too wary to collapse in our arms.

God, you know all that needs to be healed.
You have a remedy
for the inner wounds that fester.
Give them strength to keep breathing.
Help us shoulder their sorrows
as we recall them back
to the land of the living.
Show us how to help them
with the thousand details
of making a new home in a new country.
Knit them together inside and out,
as they learn moment by moment
that there can be life after death
and peace after the fiercest season.

## On the battlefield

The wars begin in our minds.
We become convinced
not only that we are right
but that our enemies are monsters.
We become convinced
that we are doing the world a service
by exterminating them.
And so, dear God, hear this prayer:
protect our minds from propaganda.
Deliver us from hatred.
Help us to discern truth and lies,
and to resist the vicious pack mentality
of every mob and army.

We give our allegiance to you.
In our time of trial keep us true to you.
And when violence surrounds us
(and it will surround us)
and when decency and love
and trust in humanity is shattered,
into your hands we give our spirits.

You are the great Safe-keeper
holding us tight when all is breaking loose,
protecting and preserving us.
You are the resurrection and the life,
picking us up, dusting us off
and sending us into the light of a new day.

## Longest night prayer

There are good years and bad years,
and then there are years from hell.
Hear our prayer, O God, for all who are tortured by war.
You know the anguished cries,
and the hearts that have turned to stone.
These are people who will die unless you save them.
We need a Saviour for those who sit in the shadow of death:
for children who have lost their parents,
and have no one to take care of them;
for teenagers forced to fight,
and who can't imagine a normal life;
for all who have killed and have witnessed the killing;
for all who are fleeing the violence
and looking for a place of refuge;
for parents who have no choices
and see their children starve;
for seniors who cannot believe the losses they have seen.
God, you know the particular pain of each one,
the stories of death and sexual assault,
the stories of homes and homelands destroyed.
You gather our stories in your arms,
and in this longest night, you hold them and us.
Hope shines like an infinitely distant star,
like a star over Bethlehem,
shining over towering concrete walls
and machine gun battlements.
What we need is angels with good news of peace on earth,
lighting the sky of our lives, offering relief.
On this longest night, in the mystery of your love,
steal into our world again.
Be born again in hearts that work for peace,

who will find a way through the chaos that is war.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us:
we trust that you will guide our feet
into the way of peace.
This is our prayer, may it be so.

## About the author

Carol Penner is a Mennonite pastor currently teaching theology at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario. She has served congregations in Ontario and Alberta and is the author of *Every Day Worship* (Herald, 2018) and *Unburdened: A Lenten Journey toward Forgiveness* (Herald, 2024).

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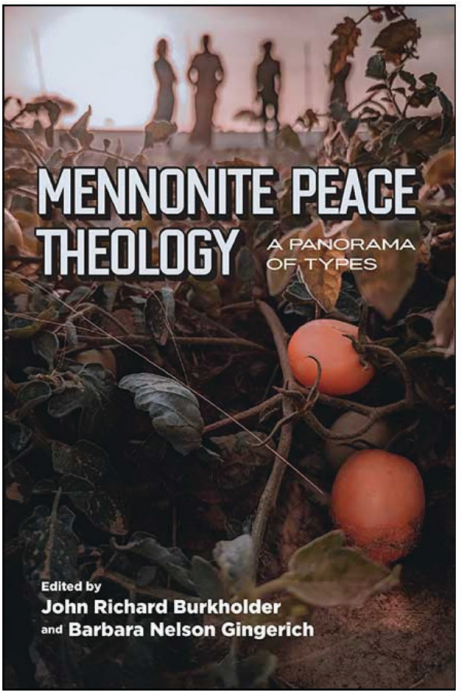


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