

***A Great Cloud of Witnesses:
Encountering Exemplars of the Gospel Practice(s) of Peace***

David C. Cramer

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Abstract

While peace is at the heart of the gospel message, there is more than one way to understand this message and put this peace into practice. In this session, David Cramer will invite participants to consider a variety of approaches to peacebuilding and nonviolence from recent Christian exemplars. Drawing from his book *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence*, David will present approaches ranging from nonviolence of Christian discipleship to realist and liberationist nonviolence. He will invite participants to discuss together which approaches might be most helpful in our contemporary contexts and how we, as Christians, might put them into practice in our churches and society.

Background

I was three weeks into my first year at a small evangelical college in Northern Indiana when a dorm-mate ducked his head into the public showers to announce that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers in New York City. As a right-wing political junkie at the time, I turned to my RA and quipped, “I got 10 bucks that says it was Osama bin Laden.”

I eventually headed to class, where a TV was rolled into the room so we could watch footage of the crash—and then the second one that confirmed that it was, indeed, a terrorist attack.

In the months that followed, I was an apologist for the war in Afghanistan, though most of my classmates didn’t take much convincing.

My sophomore year, I wrote a term paper in my ethics class titled, “A Critique of Pacifism,” which I submitted to my pacifist ethics professor. He gave it back with a lot of red ink and a recommendation that I read John

Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* so I would know what the heck I was talking about. I picked up a copy at the local Family Christian Bookstore but couldn't get through the first chapter with all the discussion of ethical theory, so I put it down for a few years.

I picked it back up while studying at an evangelical seminary in the mid-2000 aughts. The United States was now engaged in not one but two active wars abroad. I had a bit more ethical theory under my belt. And Yoder started making a lot more sense to me—so much so that I moved on from *The Politics of Jesus* to just about any Yoder book I could get my hands on.

For Christmas 2008, my spouse Andrea bought me about half a dozen of those little Yoder tracts by Herald Press, and I considered it the most thoughtful Christmas present I had ever received.

Then I started reading not just Yoder but everyone who wrote on Yoder. I read essays by Michael Cartwright and John Nugent, among many others. My first published article was a review of three collections of essays on Yoder's work, which I titled "Inheriting Yoder Faithfully."

On August 11, 2010, I wrote a letter to Stanley Hauerwas telling him that my dad had died earlier that day and that I had just finished reading his memoir *Hannah's Child*, which was helping me through the loss.

That fall I met Glen Stassen at a conference and asked him where I could go to study Yoder's work. He suggested Baylor to study with Paul Martens and Jonathan Tran, so I applied there on his recommendation and was accepted the following spring (after applying and getting rejected by Therese at Marquette the year before—but it all worked out!).

At Baylor, I managed to get through most of my courses by writing papers with topics like "Yoder and Aquinas on war" or "Yoder and Barth on natural theology" or "Yoder and Paul on union with Christ." (You get the idea.) I even got to be a TA for one of Stassen's protégés, Reggie Williams.

Then I wrote my dissertation on the relationship among the social ethics of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Yoder, where I essentially argued that Yoder's ethics was indebted to the former two much more than Hauerwas likes to admit. Jonathan Tran was able to arrange for Hauerwas to sit on my committee. Suffice it to say that Hauerwas wasn't convinced by

my reading, but he had some gracious things to say and didn't stop me from passing.

At some point during these years, I became what you might call an Ekklesia Project lurker. I was intrigued by the work you do. I read some of your pamphlets and books. And some of my professors and mentors are full-fledged EP endorsers. But, until this weekend, for reasons I won't begin to attempt to justify, I have not personally participated in an EP gathering or event.

Being an EP lurker means a couple of things. First, it means I received the invitation to speak at this gathering with much fear and trembling. I was, after all, disciplined into the way of Christian nonviolence by EP theologians. The list of initial EP endorsers from May 2002 at the end of Hauerwas and Budde's *Subversive Friendship* pamphlet reads like a bibliography of my reading list from the late 2000 aughts. What could I possibly have to say about nonviolence to you all who taught me to be nonviolent?

But, second, being an EP lurker means that I have formed certain impressions of EP's views of nonviolence that may not be entirely accurate—or at least not entirely up-to-date. Knowing that EP was started by Hauerwas and his colleagues and students has led me to believe that EP's general approach to nonviolence is what we used to call "Yoderian." Or what Yoder himself called "the pacifism of the messianic community." Or what Hauerwas would call "ecclesial nonviolence." Or what Hauerwas's detractors would call "ecclesiocentric pacifism." Or what advocates of just war who comment casually on pacifism simply call "the Yoder/Hauerwas view."

This is the view that there is a specific Christological form of pacifism that is embodied in the church and that, by contrast, identifies the violence of the world for what it is. There are hints of this kind of nonviolence in the subtitle to our gathering: "Practicing the Peace the World Cannot Give" (though I was reminded this weekend that that's a quote from Jesus, so you're in good company). This is the kind of nonviolence that John Nugent calls "Shalom A," as Phil discussed in our opening session. And it is the kind of nonviolence that was deeply formative for me. It provided an off-ramp for me from the right-wing, militaristic evangelicalism of my upbringing.

I believe that there is much to be said for this kind of nonviolence. But I have also come to the conviction that ecclesial nonviolence is incomplete at best and a bit problematic at worst. Two major events have led me to this conviction. The first happened in the middle of my time at Baylor. Ever since becoming a self-proclaimed Yoderian, I had heard vague allusions to Yoder's idiosyncratic views on sexuality within the church. As with many white male Yoder scholars in the early 2000s, I had brushed this aside as either a strange personality quirk or some kind of theological exploration that was unrelated to his pacifism. Then in 2013, a number of women, mostly from the Mennonite Church, publicly and forcefully named Yoder's actions for what they were: a form of *violence*. The fact that arguably the most influential voice for Christian pacifism in the 20th century—and certainly the most influential theologian *for me*—was himself a perpetrator of sexualized violence was disorienting for me, to say the least.

The second event that complicated my views of ecclesial nonviolence was that on January 1, 2017—with my newly minted theology PhD in hand—I began pastoring a small evangelical congregation in a low-income neighborhood in South Bend. Nineteen days later, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States. I learned through the crucible of leading a congregation through the tumultuous four years of Trump's presidency—the last of which included a pandemic—that declaring the church as the *alternative* to the violence of empire required a number of caveats. Theological aphorisms I had absorbed, like “Let the church be the church so the world can be the world,” started to ring hollow when the world was killing my neighbors, often with the vocal support of the church writ large.

The denomination that we were members of at the time started careening headlong into Christian nationalism. Although I had long been convinced to stay true to the church of my baptism, as a pastor I became even more convinced that faithfulness to the gospel required realigning our church's denominational ties. This ultimately landed us in the Mennonite Church, the place from which our former denomination had splintered off over a century prior.

Our church's mission statement is to “seek the peace [or *shalom*] of our neighborhood by sharing God's love with our neighbors.” And our vision is “to become a church that follows Jesus, the prince of peace, and embodies God's peaceable kingdom in the Keller Park neighborhood, the city of South Bend, and beyond.” I learned that embodying this mission and vision

requires more than rejection of war. It requires speaking up and acting on behalf of those in our community who are being deprived of *shalom*—whether due to socio-economic status, citizenship status, racial or ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, disability, or some combination thereof.

Through this all, I sought to stay true to my pacifist convictions. In addition to pastoring, I had begun working at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where I teach the course Christian Attitudes toward War, Peace, and Revolution. This course originally had been designed and was then taught for decades at AMBS by John Howard Yoder. Due to Yoder’s troubling legacy at the seminary, I set out to redesign the course in such a way that none of Yoder’s writings would be required reading. While this was not without its challenges—as Yoder had literally written the book *Christian Attitudes toward War, Peace and Revolution!*—I found it refreshing and inspiring.

I realized that in my laser-sharp focus on Yoderian nonviolence, I had missed out on a great cloud of witnesses to Christian nonviolence in the 20th and early-21st centuries. These witnesses spoke in different registers and from different contexts from what I was used to. They differed in their understandings of what constitutes violence and how best to respond to it. They differed in the biblical and theological underpinnings for their understandings of nonviolence. But they all shared a desire to faithfully live out the gospel of peace in their respective contexts.

And so, with my Baylor colleague Myles Werntz, I wrote *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence* to make sense of this diversity of Christian witnesses to nonviolence. As we state in the introduction, our argument is that “Christian nonviolence, at its best, does not promise to end all wars or permanently settle all disputes. Rather, Christian nonviolence is an exercise of Christian wisdom, guided by the Spirit, who transforms our minds so that we ‘may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Rom. 12:2).”

The question for us to discern as we conclude this EP gathering, then, is this: *How is the Spirit guiding us to embody the gospel of peace in our contexts today?*

I understand the concern that EP seems to have shifted over the years in its articulation and expression of nonviolence and shalom. But I would like to suggest that this is at least in part because our context has shifted. As a

number of long-time EP participants have reflected, EP's expression of nonviolence in the early years was in large part a response to 9/11—that is, to American empire and U.S. wars abroad. It is fairly easy to remain non-partisan when Republicans and Democrats alike dismiss you as the pacifist voice crying out in the wilderness.

But in subsequent years, American empire has come home to roost in the form of white Christian nationalism, which found its biggest promoter in a sexually violent reality TV personality who rode his way to the White House on 81% of the evangelical Christian vote. According to Indianapolis-based sociologist Andrew Whitehead in his new book *American Idolatry*, “Close to two-thirds of white American Christians are at least favorable toward Christian nationalism, and that number increases to over 75 percent if we look solely at white evangelicals.”

This is a problem not only for the United States but also—and perhaps especially—for the church. January 6, 2021, has become the new 9/11 for our current generation. Trying to embody nonviolence in this new reality might not make you a Democrat, but it should at least make you *not a Republican*. And while we may lament a two-party system that provides no obvious third way for radical Christian politics to gain traction, I believe that Christian faithfulness requires us to discern the signs of the times instead of waxing nostalgic for the good old days when everybody was equally against us.

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

In our remaining time, I want to introduce witnesses to the gospel of peace that may have gotten overshadowed at EP by Yoder's influence but who may provide us resources for discerning what nonviolent Christian faithfulness might look like for us today. In our book, we organize these witnesses under 8 different headers, which represent 8 different approaches to Christian nonviolence.

I trust that many of us are familiar with Reinhold Niebuhr's distinction between two forms of pacifism that he witnessed in his day. The first was a more inward-focused, quietist, absolutist, communalist pacifism that focuses on fidelity to Jesus's teachings on nonresistance and in so doing offers a witness to the world of another kingdom without trying to change the world.

And the second was a more outward-focused, activist, political pacifism that takes Jesus's teachings less literally and focuses instead on the effectiveness of nonviolence, using nonviolence as a tool for social change and political transformation in the world.

Niebuhr's distinction has persisted in the popular imagination, as the first, communal kind of nonviolence has come to be associated with names like Yoder and Hauerwas—and, by extensions, the Ekklesia Project—and the second, political kind of nonviolence has come to be associated with Martin Luther King Jr. and nonviolent movements for civil rights.

Perhaps we might think of this distinction in terms of whether one prefers to render *dikaiosune* in the Beatitudes as “righteousness” or as “justice,” as in, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *dikaiosune*, for they shall be filled.”

I structure my presentation of the 8 streams with this distinction in mind, beginning with 4 streams more often associated with the first type and ending with 4 streams more often associate with the second type.

After presenting each of these two groups, we'll take some time in groups to discuss these questions:

1. How does each stream of Christian nonviolence resonate with my own understanding of Christian nonviolence—or that of EP more generally?
2. What about each stream do I find challenging or even troubling?
3. What might it look like to practice each approach in my church context?
4. What might it look like for EP to embody this approach to nonviolence going forward?

In doing so, I think we'll find Niebuhr's distinction to be a bit simplistic, as each stream has its own unique theo-logic.

Nonviolence of Christian Discipleship: Following Jesus in a World at War

The first stream, nonviolence of Christian discipleship, is most often associated with Yoder and his followers. But in my course, I have swapped out assigning Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* with assigning André Trocmé's *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*. And my mostly Mennonite students often identify this book as the highlight of the course.

Many of us know the story of the Trocmés and their small mountainous village of Le Chambon, France, which became a refuge for nearly 5,000 Jews and other persons fleeing the Holocaust. In a biography of Trocmé, pastor and leader of the movement, the biographer asks, "How is it that the population in Le Chambon and the surrounding area almost unanimously embraced the rescue effort?"¹

The answer lies in Trocmé's understanding of nonviolence as a form of Christian discipleship. This stream emphasizes the role of the gathered Christian community in Christian nonviolence. Nonviolence is a way of living in the world, shaped by the reading of Scripture, corporate worship, and the practices of life together. Christian nonviolence is a habit of regular discipleship, which then becomes the mode of engagement in times of conflict.

Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution offers a reading of the Gospels—particularly Luke's Gospel—to make the case for nonviolence as the way of the communities that Jesus founded. Trocmé connects the churches of Jesus to the ethic of Jesus on precisely this point: that to be a disciple of Jesus is not simply to confess faith in Jesus but also to follow Jesus in the way of the cross.

For Trocmé, it is not enough to say that Jesus's example is one of nonviolence. Instead, Jesus's very substance as the mediator between the community and God abolishes whatever violence was previously present. For Trocmé, the way in which Jesus mediates for humanity and the way in which the church is connected to Christ morally and to the world in witness are integrally related. They are a sacramental matrix of divine imitation, in which the church follows in the way of Jesus, as it is in this way that Jesus joins us to God the Father.

Nonviolence as Christian Virtue: Becoming a Peaceable People

Dorothy Day, a Marxist convert to Catholicism, often wrote affectionately about her Marxist past, for the things she appreciated about Marxism were the very things she saw brought to fullness in Christianity.² Marxists spoke of loving the poor, while Christianity spoke of this *and* of loving their oppressors. Marxists spoke of feeding the poor, while Christianity spoke of this *and* of feeding the soul. For Day, Marxism in many ways represented a glittering vision of temporal life, but Christianity offered that world crowned by the love of God.

Throughout her life, Day thus continued to affirm the natural virtues as she saw them exercised in the most unlikely places, from Ho Chi Minh to Gandhi.³ And throughout her life, she continued to work in coalitions with non-Catholics, seeing the virtuous non-Christian as on the way to the kingdom of God.

No place was Day's approach clearer than with the practice of nonviolence. War forms us, she said, in all the wrong kinds of virtues. War produces new divisions within humanity and justifies practices that reinforce those divisions: taxation, nationalist rhetoric, racism, and so forth.

Not only does nonviolence bear witness to a different way of viewing the world, but practicing it forms us toward God's kingdom by forming in us a different set of virtues.⁴ Whereas acts of justice and courage could be seen in many places, nonviolence transfigures these acts by redirecting them toward Christ. Day describes the practice of nonviolence as among the works of mercy, through which people not only witness to Christ's work but also are transformed as they do them.⁵

Since the late 1970s, Stanley Hauerwas has been at the forefront of the recovery of virtue among Protestant Christian ethics, albeit in an idiosyncratic way. Rather than beginning by enumerating the virtues as Thomas does, Hauerwas speaks of *character* as the all-encompassing form of human life.⁶ If we take our cues from the person of Jesus as to what a virtuous life looks like, Hauerwas contends, the picture of virtue is inseparable from being a person of nonviolence. Nonviolence, as one of the practices we learn in church, becomes habitual over time, interwoven with how we understand the classical virtues.

The narrative of what it means to be a Christian—including the nonviolence intrinsic to it—is judged according to whether it coheres to Jesus's own life.

Hauerwas's account of the virtues is thus interwoven with nonviolence: to be a person of *Christian* virtue is inextricably to be a nonviolent person. For Hauerwas, virtue takes a specific narrative form, embodied in the life of the church, as the church learns to live out the narrative of Scripture in its own day and time.

Nonviolence of Christian Mysticism: Uniting with the God of Peace

Howard Thurman, pastor and dean of chapel at Howard University and Boston University, was a one-time Baptist minister deeply involved in struggles against segregation and racism. He was part of a delegation who travelled in 1935 to visit Gandhi, bringing back Gandhi's vision of nonviolence to America.⁷ But unlike some who would later emphasize the tactical nature of Gandhi's vision, such as Gene Sharp,⁸ Thurman resonated with the mystical center of Gandhi's thought, viewing it as the center of any cohesive account of nonviolence.

For Thurman, nonviolence is rooted in a transformative encounter of the soul with God. It is only in such an encounter with God that the soul opens up a new way of living in the world.⁹

For nonviolent mystics, the mystical basis for nonviolence addresses the deepest sources of our conflict—our distorted vision of ourselves and of God. Yet, this basis is difficult to articulate, for as German theologian and mystic Dorothee Sölle writes, mysticism is “an experience of God, an experience of being one with God . . . that breaks through the existing limitations of human comprehension, feeling and reflection.”¹⁰

For the mystics, our union is in the God who is beyond language, beyond being captured as an idol. Although slipping beyond human comprehension makes the encounter with God difficult to speak of, it is also why mysticism leads to peace.

For Thurman, in the mystical encounter of prayer one transcends the doctrinal particularities that divide Christians and centers one's attention and being on God, the source of all existence. This experience before God, for Thurman, drives down to the core of the issue of violence: the self-righteous and egoistic self.¹¹ In the encounter with God, who is love, the self-righteous ego is given no place to hide and is displaced from its throne by the desire for the unity and beauty of God.

He writes that our conflicts are self-perpetuating, as the wounded conform to their wounding, repeating the wounds we receive from others in an endless desire for revenge.¹² The mystical encounter with God, by contrast, replaces our self-righteous need for vindication with a desire for union because the soul has witnessed the love of God.

Apocalyptic Nonviolence: Exposing the Power of Death

On May 17, 1968, nine Catholic activists opened up a new avenue for nonviolence. Going to the Selective Service office of Catonsville, Maryland, these activists took several hundred draft records and set them ablaze in the parking lot, using homemade napalm. In destroying implements of war, they began to confront the means of war more actively.

In subsequent years, figures like William Stringfellow and Daniel Berrigan articulated this apocalyptic vision for nonviolence as less concerned with being included in a robust democratic process and more committed to how nonviolence exposes the rot within the system it opposes.

Apocalyptic nonviolence takes as its starting point not only that the cross and resurrection of Jesus unveiled the powers and principalities of the world for what they are but also that Jesus's death and resurrection call for Christians to actively oppose the machinations of Death in the world.

What is primary to apocalyptic nonviolence is the guiding conviction that nonviolence continues the work of God in Christ, which exposes Death for what it is. The death and resurrection of Christ do not merely inspire us to act but are carried forward, by the power of the Spirit, in the bodies and actions of Christians today. As such, the contest between Death and Christ continues through the actions of Christians who join in the revolution against the powers and principalities.

According to Stringfellow, the various idols throughout society that lead us away from God are motivated by one single power: Death. In struggling against the powers of Death we are engaging not simply material structures but also the demonic spirit animating their actions. For Stringfellow, the powers move people toward Death in manifold ways, such that opposing them requires great discernment. Freedom, then, comes from a refusal to trust in any deliverance from Death other than God in Christ.¹³

Stringfellow thus maintains a nefarious vision of the role of government. Writing in the wake of the arrest of the Berrigan brothers—who had been

among the “Catonsville Nine”—Stringfellow writes that “the State has only one power it can use against human beings: death. The state can persecute you, prosecute you, imprison you, exile you, execute you. All of these mean the same thing.”¹⁴

The Plowshares Movement, started by Philip Berrigan, was involved in numerous actions similar to the Catonsville Nine. The group utilized tactics such as burglarizing an FBI office, hammering on warplanes and nuclear warheads, burning draft cards, and refusing to pay taxes in support of the Vietnam War.

None of these actions were designed to influence lawmakers, although opposing unjust laws drew attention to their injustice. Rather, these dramatic actions were meant to enact the ways of God over against Death by beating a weapon into some other implement and by destroying those things that were assaulting human life.

Evaluating These Approaches

At this point, we’ll break into groups to evaluate these four streams of nonviolence by asking the four questions I mentioned before. We’ll take about 10 minutes for this, so you may not have time to systematically work through all 4 questions for each of the 4 streams. Instead, feel free in your groups to focus on what stands out to you the most.

For reference, here are the four questions again:

1. How does each stream of Christian nonviolence resonate with my own understanding of Christian nonviolence—or that of EP more generally?
2. What about each stream do I find challenging or even troubling?
3. What might it look like to practice each approach in my church context?
4. What might it look like for EP to embody this approach to nonviolence going forward?

Realist Nonviolence: Creating Just Peace in a Fallen World

In the aftermath of the Great War, Reinhold Niebuhr emerged as a critic of the social-gospel peace movement of which he had earlier been a part. He argued that the pacifism of the social gospel was predicated on naive optimism about the possibilities of human societies that was thoroughly discredited by the war.

According to his Christian realism, Christ provides the absolute moral ideal, but humans—especially in societies—are incapable of achieving this ideal because of sin. When taking account of sinfulness, moral absolutes become elusive and compromises become necessary. For Niebuhr, such moral compromises include the willingness to use violent force to combat greater evils of tyranny or anarchy.

Niebuhr’s Christian realism is often seen as marking a radical break from the social gospel movement that preceded it. But Niebuhr identifies leading theologian of the social gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, as “the voice of realism at the turn of the century.”¹⁵ Rauschenbusch himself describes the social gospel as “realistic in its interests,” focusing on the concrete ethical aspects of Jesus’s life and ministry.¹⁶ He argues that Jesus presented a number of “axiomatic social convictions” about the value of life, human solidarity, and standing up for the marginalized.¹⁷

On the question of violence, Rauschenbusch identifies Jesus as committed to absolute nonresistance, which he argues is not “a strange and erratic part of [Jesus’s] teaching.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Rauschenbusch does not naively suggest that societies should determine policy by asking *What would Jesus do?* as one of his social gospel contemporaries proposed.¹⁹ Instead, he argues that “the dominant purpose” of Jesus’s life was “the establishment of the Kingdom of God.”²⁰

In Rauschenbusch’s thought, the Kingdom of God serves as an eschatological ideal that is never fully realizable within history but that serves as a perpetual standard toward which to strive and by which to critique current social systems.²¹ “At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order,” Rauschenbusch writes.²²

Rauschenbusch’s own increasingly strident pacifism in the later years of his life was based not on optimism about human societies’ ability to emulate Jesus but rather on a realistic assessment of the moral and political destructiveness of war.

In the aftermath of the Great War, a young Methodist philosopher named Georgia Harkness joined a young Niebuhr and others on a trip to Europe led by social gospel evangelist Sherwood Eddy. While their firsthand encounters with survivors of the war and their observations of the war's destructiveness disabused both Harkness and Niebuhr of any lingering naive optimism they may have shared, they drew differing lessons. Niebuhr came to reject the pacifism of the social gospel as unrealistic, while Harkness came to adopt it as the only realistic way to pursue peace and justice in a fallen world.

Harkness eventually moved from teaching philosophy to teaching theology—becoming the first woman to teach theology at an American seminary and the first woman to be elected member of the American Theological Society.²³ And she admits that wrestling with the thought of theologians like Niebuhr caused her earlier liberalism to become “chastened and deepened.”²⁴ But, despite these changes, her pacifism remained consistent: “I have become a more convinced pacifist in a day when many better Christians than I have felt impelled to surrender their pacifism,” she writes. “War destroys every value for which Christianity stands, and to oppose war by more war is only to deepen the morass into which humanity has fallen. . . .”

On the question of compromise, Harkness agrees with Niebuhr: “The absolute demands of love must be lived out within the relativities of human existence in which duties come mixed, and a perfect course of action is seldom open to us.” Harkness thus believes that coercive force is necessary to maintain “an approximation of justice.”

Shortly after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Baptist theologian Glen Stassen began to articulate a form of realist nonviolence that he named “just peacemaking,” a middle way between pacifism and just war.

He acknowledges that his thought is also rooted in the realism of his Union Theological Seminary teacher Reinhold Niebuhr. In particular, he credits Niebuhr for teaching him “to pay attention less to the hopeful ideals people declare than to their basic interests, loyalties, and power relations, and less to the promises of their high-sounding words than to the pattern of their actions.”

Instead of viewing war as a problem to be addressed when it erupts, just peacemaking emphasizes a series of peacemaking initiatives. One of the practical advantages of just peacemaking, for Stassen, is that one need not be a committed pacifist in order to engage in peacemaking initiatives. This provides ecumenical possibilities for just peacemaking, as theological debates between just war traditions and pacifist ones are sidelined in favor of practical alliances.

Nonviolence as Political Practice: Bringing Nonviolence into the Public Square

Sitting in Birmingham Jail in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter to his fellow clergy, answering their question as to why an “outside agitator” was leading the African American community of Birmingham, Alabama, in nonviolent protest.²⁵ Acknowledging their complaint, he writes, “You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. . . . It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.”²⁶

In this letter, King signals the emergence of a different way of thinking about Christian nonviolence as a form of public, political action. This stream is primarily concerned with how nonviolence—as a normative Christian practice—can be the basis for public action. It is for this reason that King emphasized the role of nonviolence as pricking the American conscience. King describes mass civil disobedience as “a strategy for social change which is at least as forceful as an ambulance with its siren on full.” King’s tactics can be used in service to this end, but domestic tactics served the ends of publicizing immoral actions and putting pressure on white consciences with respect to racial injustices.

In exercising protest in a nonviolent fashion, the Civil Rights Movement provided opportunity for interracial and democratic coalitions to be built. The democratic orientation of political nonviolence lends to its practitioners seeking common cause from a plural audience. In the career of King, multiple kinds of public performances appear. At the onset of his career, explicitly theological actions accompanied the performance of nonviolence. Other actions led by King, however, are more broadly performed. In these cases, King mobilizes the language of the church, though the performance is less explicitly religious in nature.²⁷

The approaches of César Chávez and Desmond Tutu likewise bear out this non-sectarian vision of Christian nonviolence. Chávez, the leader of the United Farm Workers strikes, intentionally used a mixture of Catholic, Mexican, and democratic imagery in his strikes and protests. This broad appeal was designed to connect to a Mesoamerican ethic of suffering that transcended religious confessionality.

Tutu likewise sees the work of Jesus as non-sectarian. Commenting on the disunity in South Africa, Tutu writes, “We have heard of God’s dream from His prophets throughout history and modern times from great leaders and humanitarians like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. . . . The visions and triumphs of these prophets of God helped change their nations and inspire the rest of us around the world in our own struggles for equality.”²⁸

For Tutu, as with King, “it is a moral universe that we inhabit, and good and right and equity matter in the universe of the God we worship.” Trusting in the moral arc of the universe to bend, in God’s providence, toward a justly ordered world, practitioners of Christian political nonviolence emphasize that means and ends must cohere: we cannot bear witness to an order characterized by nonviolence using violent means.

Liberationist Nonviolence: Disrupting the Spiral of Violence

Óscar Romero confronted a multifaceted reality of violence when he became archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Romero did not set out to be a liberation theologian. He distanced himself from the more radical wing of the movement and adhered closely to the Catholic Church’s social teachings.²⁹ Yet, it was precisely because of his adherence to the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching that he became an outspoken voice for the oppressed of El Salvador after he was appointed archbishop.

Romero saw violence not as an interruption to the ordinary but as an ordinary facet of the daily lives of Salvadorans. As agricultural land was privatized and concentrated in the hands of wealthy elites, the average Salvadorans lost their means of subsistence. For Romero, this situation is not merely an injustice that leads to violence; it is itself a form of violence. By depriving citizens of land to farm for themselves and their families, the landowners—and the state apparatuses that supported them—were inflicting violence on their fellow Salvadorans.

To see and name violence rightly, for Romero, means identifying the roots and not merely the shoots of violence. It means seeing violence as a pervasive smog or tranquil water and not merely as bullets and bloodshed, though the former often leads to the latter. This ordinary violence, as an assault against human dignity through deprivation of the necessities of life, is then reified in structures and institutions.

For publicly identifying and naming the structural violence of his society, Romero ultimately became its victim. On March 24, 1980, while celebrating the mass at a hospital for the terminally ill, Romero was shot in the heart in an assassination ordered by a right-wing politician described as a “principal henchmen for wealthy landowners.”³⁰

If violence is as pervasive as liberationists describe, then a personal commitment to pacifism will not be sufficient to overcome it.³¹ Liberationist nonviolence, then, is not merely about refraining from overt acts of violence. It is about actively working to *undo* the violence that is inimical to human flourishing.

We find this emphasis on undoing violence in the work of Dom Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Brazil, from 1964 to 1985. As with Romero, Câmara used his platform to advocate for the poor of his country, even as he was subjected to censorship and threat from Brazil’s military dictatorship in power throughout the duration of his term as archbishop.³² Câmara was an outspoken advocate of liberation theology who took a decidedly nonviolent approach to liberation.³³

In his 1971 tract, *Spiral of Violence*, Câmara writes, “It is common knowledge that poverty kills just as surely as the most bloody war. But poverty does more than kill. It leads to physical deformity . . . , to psychological deformity . . . , and to moral deformity.”

As with Romero, Câmara identifies such violence by its pervasiveness, its ordinariness. “You will find that everywhere the injustices are a form of violence,” he writes. “One can and must say that they are everywhere the basic violence.”³⁴

The natural response to such violence is violent revolt. Although Câmara writes as someone committed to nonviolence, he does not condemn such violence in principle. Instead, he argues strategically and pragmatically that revolutionary violence is an ineffective response to institutionalized

violence. It simply makes “the authorities consider themselves obliged to preserve or re-establish public order, even if this means using force.”

Câmara is not naive about the consciences of dictators. He painstakingly details all the ways authoritarian regimes try to stifle even nonviolent protest. But he argues that nonviolent action is the most effective way to engender the sympathies of the people, especially young people, and that change cannot happen without widespread popular support. Those in power will always act in their self-interest, so applying liberating more pressure to fight injustice is a way to make them see that it is in their own interests to do what is just.

The goal of liberationist nonviolence is not merely to minimize the clash between revolutionary force and state force. Rather, it is about addressing the root cause of such violence: institutionalized or structural violence. Câmara writes, “Generally speaking, the strategy of nonviolent action aims to cause the foundations of unjust power to collapse. Oppressive, repressive power rests on resignation, collaboration, and obedience on the part of the people. Nonviolence tries to organize noncollaboration and disobedience by as many people as possible. No power can last long, even by force of arms, against a whole population that refuses to obey it and recognizes another power instead.”³⁵

Christian Antiviolence: Resisting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

In March 2019, fifteen women—including EP’s Erin Dufault-Hunter—convened for a writing consultation at AMBS, on the theme “Liberating the Politics of Jesus.” The combination of this location and this theme was not coincidental. These women were meeting in the very building where John Howard Yoder had taught and written for nearly three decades—until a disciplinary process in 1992 led to his dismissal from campus for sexualized violence.

The question of how one of the leading 20th-century advocates of Christian nonviolence could have engaged in violent conduct toward women has vexed many proponents of Christian nonviolence. But to the women gathered for this consultation, the problem with peace theology has always been its failure to see the integral connections between the violence of war and genocide and sexualized and gender-based violence.

This observation leads to our final stream: *Christian antiviolence*. This is active resistance to sexualized and gender-based forms of violence, whether interpersonal or societal.

Christian antiviolence begins not with abstract theological or ethical principles or even with interpretations of Scripture. Rather, it begins with reflection on the experiences of women and sexual minorities—especially victim-survivors of sexualized violence. And it draws from those experiences to interrogate theological and ethical categories and to dismantle the patriarchal and white supremacist systems and structures that perpetuate sexualized and gender-based violence.

“Experience, which is the basis for all knowledge, has become the primary source of comprehending sexual violence.” So writes pastor, theologian, and victim-survivor advocate Marie Fortune on the opening page of her pioneering 1983 work, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*. According to Fortune, “Sexual violence as a topic for ethical discourse among Christians has gone unaddressed.” As founding director of the FaithTrust Institute in Seattle, Fortune writes not only out of her own experiences but also out of the stories of sexualized violence shared by the victim-survivors with which she worked.³⁶

Following Fortune, one of the defining features of Christian antiviolence is that it begins with and centers on the experiences of victim-survivors. The criterion by which to assess forms of Christian nonviolence is this: Do they contribute to or combat sexualized and gender-based violence?

In her 1999 book, *Wounds of the Spirit*, Traci West centers the experiences of black women in her development of an ethic of resistance to interpersonal violence. She writes, “It is by personally listening to women that I have come to recognize the specific, interwoven nature of the intimate and systemic violence African-American women face.”

West’s work moves through stages of carefully listening to women’s stories and hearing their anguish before assessing the causes of their suffering and developing methods of resistance. Doing so ensures that her proposals for resisting and overcoming violence against women are not simply theoretical but include “tangible, ethical” practices of communal resistance.³⁷

Fortune describes sexualized violence as, “first and foremost, an act of violence, hatred, and aggression.” It is like other acts of violence in that “there is a violation of and injury to victims,” whether those injuries be

“psychological or physical.” For Fortune, sexualized violence is primarily about violence and only secondarily about the sexual nature of that violence. What makes it violence, for Fortune, is not that it is sexual but that it is “a profound violation of another person which is injurious and destructive.” At the same time, sexualized violence is in many ways *especially* violent. “Any victim of rape knows that she has experienced the most violent act possible short of murder,” Fortune writes.³⁸

West calls Christian communities to come alongside women who “initiate resistance on behalf of themselves and in so doing advance the interests of a civil society,” enlisting Christian ethics in this project of constructing what she calls an “ethic of violence resistance.” Such a Christian social ethic begins with an unflinching “commitment to taking violence against African-American women seriously.” Doing so exposes the ways white supremacy, patriarchy, and sexualized and gender-based violence are intimately connected. An ethic of violence resistance therefore must involve not only empowering women to resist abusive partners but also committing the church to dismantle white supremacy and patriarchy within it and its surrounding society.

Evaluating These Approaches

Again, let’s break into groups to evaluate these four streams of nonviolence by asking the four questions as we did before:

1. How does each stream of Christian nonviolence resonate with my own understanding of Christian nonviolence—or that of EP more generally?
2. What about each stream do I find challenging or even troubling?
3. What might it look like to practice each approach in my church context?
4. What might it look like for EP to embody this approach to nonviolence going forward?

Conclusion

As we have seen, Christian nonviolence is not as a settled position but is rather as a form of Spirit-led moral discernment about that which is “good and acceptable and perfect” in God’s world (Rom. 12:2). The eight streams we have discussed reach the conclusions they do because of different underlying theo-logics that animate them.

For Christian nonviolence to live into the future, it not only must address itself to the old ways of violence but must also include a vision for addressing the proliferation of new forms of violence. As we move further into the twenty-first century, we can continue to learn from the great cloud of witnesses to Christian nonviolence in its many forms from the 20th and early-21st centuries that we have surveyed.

What is ultimately needed to face new challenges will not be a single, unified form of Christian nonviolence but a proliferation of new forms, each drawing wisdom from the past while looking ahead to ever-evolving challenges. This will mean the willingness of proponents of each stream to acknowledge that those from the other streams are likewise anticipating the peace of God in their practice and witness and to creatively and patiently live in witness to the prince of peace who heals the world of all the various forms of violence in it.

I want to thank EP for its vital role in this work in the decades since 9/11 and to invite you to continue this work in new ways as together we face the challenges that lie ahead. May the peace of Christ be with you as you do. Thank you.

Notes

¹ Chalamet, *Revivalism and Social Christianity*, 143.

² Day, *From Union Square to Rome*.

³ For a full account of Day’s nonviolence, see Werntz, *Bodies of Peace*, 107–155.

⁴ Day, “Fight Conscription.” This essay and other Catholic Worker letters by Day are accessible at <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/>.

⁵ Werntz, *Bodies of Peace*, 144–50.

⁶ Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*.

⁷ For this history, see Dixie and Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World*; Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle*.

⁸ See Sharp’s *Politics of Nonviolent Action* trilogy.

⁹ For a full exposition of Thurman on mysticism, see Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” 190–221; Thurman, *Creative Encounter*.

¹⁰ Sölle, *Strength of the Weak*, 86–87.

¹¹ Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 133.

¹² Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 88.

¹³ Stringfellow, *Keeper of the Word*, 69.

¹⁴ Stringfellow, *Second Birthday*, 133.

¹⁵ R. Niebuhr, “Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective,” in *Faith and Politics*, 34.

¹⁶ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 147. Rauschenbusch writes that the social gospel “may create a feeling of apathy toward speculative questions” since it is “modern and is out for realities. It is ethical and wants ethical results from theology” (148).

¹⁷ See Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*.

¹⁸ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 263.

¹⁹ This phrase was popularized by fellow social gospel proponent Charles Monroe Sheldon’s bestselling novel, *In His Steps*.

²⁰ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 150.

²¹ As Max Stackhouse explains, “The logic and structure of Rauschenbusch’s thought about the Kingdom of God is precisely the same as that used to analyze and evaluate modern society. Indeed, it is the model upon which the evaluation is based. In so far as the social system lends itself to the development of the integrated structure which Rauschenbusch sets forth in the eschatological formulations, it is approved; in so far as it diverts or inhibits developments toward the Kingdom of God, it is criticized and radical transformation is called for.” Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 81.

²² Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 338; cf. 251.

²³ See Micks, “Georgia Harkness,” 311; Harkness, “Spiritual Pilgrimage,” 348.

²⁴ Harkness, “Spiritual Pilgrimage,” 349.

²⁵ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Radical King*, 128.

²⁶ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 129.

²⁷ See Selby, *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom*.

²⁸ Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 21–22.

²⁹ On the complicated and sometimes ironic relationship between liberation theologians and Catholic orthodoxy, see Carnes, “Reconsideration of Religious Authority,” 473–74.

³⁰ Clifford Krauss, “U.S., Aware of Killings, Worked with Salvador’s Rightists, Papers Suggest,” 9. As Krauss describes, investigations traced Romero’s assassination to the order of Roberto d’Aubuisson, whom the CIA described as “principal henchman for wealthy landowners and a coordinator of the right-wing death squads that have murdered several thousand suspected leftists and leftist sympathizers during the past year.” These findings were covered up by both the Reagan and first Bush administrations, who provided aid to d’Aubuisson in his fight against “leftist guerrillas.”

³¹ Hélder Câmara, discussed below, writes, “I don’t like the word ‘pacifism.’ It sounds too much like ‘passivism.’ And if it means peace at any price—even at the price of injustice or servitude, for oneself or others—then that of course will never do.” He thus addresses pacifists directly:

I always ask those who in conscience refuse military service, not to sit back and take it easy just because they’re officially left alone. My friends, the violence you reject won’t disappear or diminish simply because you’ve chosen not to participate in it! You can’t rest on your laurels! You can’t wash your hands of violence. If you think violence is an evil, you should also believe that only nonviolence can stop it. You should give nonviolence a push. So give the energy you’re not spending in the army to nonviolence and action as a means of resolving conflicts and furthering justice!

Câmara, *Questions for Living*, 88, 89.

³² For a helpful introduction to Câmara’s life and work, see Francis McDonagh, “Introduction: Dom Helder in Context,” in Câmara, *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings*, 11–36. Much of Câmara’s writing remains untranslated. For select English-language translations of his writings, see the following Câmara texts: *Church and Colonialism*; *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings*; *Hoping against All Hope*; *Questions for Living*; *Revolution through Peace*; and *Spiral of Violence*. See also the English-language tribute to Câmara’s life and work, Schipani and Wessels, *Promise of Hope*.

³³ This is not to say that Câmara was necessarily opposed to Catholic Social Teaching. When asked why the church does not denounce the arms race as explicitly as he does, Câmara responded, “The popes, the Council, the bishops’ conferences, have done this: there can be no peace without respect for human rights, without justice among nations, without the creation of a world authority able to arbitrate conflicts, and so on. It’s not their fault if their proposals get no better reception than their condemnations. Do Christians even know what these proposals are?” Câmara, *Questions for Living*, 81.

³⁴ Câmara, *Spiral of Violence*, 25–26, 29–30.

³⁵ Câmara, *Questions for Living*, 92.

³⁶ Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*, 5, 42, 43. See also Fortune's revised and update volume, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. For information on the FaithTrust Institute, see <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/>.

³⁷ West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, vii, 1, 2, 193. Leah Thomas observes that West's approach is intentionally multi-disciplinary, drawing not only from Christian theology and ethics but also from theories of violence that have been historically neglected within Christian thought (email, February 21, 2021). For Thomas's own proposal for anti-racist pastoral care inspired by West's multi-disciplinary approach, see L. Thomas, *Just Care*.

³⁸ Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*, 5–7.