

Christian Peace Theology: Internal Critique and Interfaith Dialogue

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ABSTRACT: This session will survey theological debates over war and violence within the Christian tradition in a way that assumes others – particularly Muslims – are listening in. It will present Christian pacifism as the sort of internal critique that representatives of any faith tradition must honestly do in order to dialogue well with others in the service of peace.

Perhaps it is unwise to begin a paper in service of Muslim-Christian dialogue by citing a controversial commentator weighing in on still another controversy. But bear with me for a moment. I refer to an op-ed piece in 2006 by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman entitled “Islam and the Pope.” Friedman used controversial remarks by Pope Benedict as the occasion to identify which dialogue he considered most urgent -- not interfaith dialogue between different Abrahamic religions, but intrafaith dialogue between believers of the same faith. Friedman directed his appeal toward Muslims. But he could also have done so toward Christians.

The world certainly needs an honest and respectful dialogue between Christianity and Islam, Friedman wrote, as well as an honest and respectful dialogue between the Islamic world and the West. But above all, “there needs to be a respectful, free dialogue between Muslims and Muslims.” His years as a Middle East correspondent had let him to see “the compassionate side of Islam in action” repeatedly. Yet he still found himself confused at times about what Islam

stands for. And if he was confused, no wonder that the “Western masses” were too. So if the world is to avoid a “slow-motion clash of civilizations,” Friedman argued, it urgently needs dialogue between Muslims themselves. “What matters is not what Muslims tell us they stand for. What matters is what they tell themselves, in their own languages, and how they treat their own.”¹

Now, I cannot be sure whether Friedman was right or not. Nor can you, it seems, unless you are Muslim, in dialogue with other Muslims. Think about it. If you like puzzles, this one is a delight. Because if he is right, only Muslims can decide that by dialoguing among themselves -- not others, not him! They must decide whether and how dialogue can proceed most fruitfully.

I cite Friedman, therefore, neither to chide him nor to chime in with him, but to draw out two lessons: The first is that intrafaith dialogue can have a huge impact on interfaith dialogue. What we say to one another within our faith communities will impact others. When Pope Benedict illustrated his 2006 lecture with an obscure historical reference concerning violence and Islam, his audience was Christian and his topic was Western philosophy. Yet his remarks lit up the global media. So when Friedman wrote that what Muslims say to Muslims matters to the world, he had a point. “Intra” dialogue can always impact “inter” dialogue.

Second lesson: Even so, to prove fruitful every intrafaith dialogue must proceed according to its own integrity. “In their own languages,” as Friedman put it. Even when others are listening in upon our intramural, intrafaith debates with intense interest, those debates must somehow be true to the core of that faith even as they debate the faith and its implications.

Within Christianity, then, pacifist communities and advocates of nonviolence have been trying for centuries to play very much the role and elicit very much the same debates that Friedman has called for among Muslims today. By the witness of their words and lives, nonviolent Christians have consistently posed a trenchant set of questions:

What do we Christians really stand for? Others are watching -- are we confusing them? Jesus loved us when we were still in rebellion against God and he taught us in turn to love even our enemies. Nothing could do more, he said, to reveal the character of the God of Abraham. Do

we not then send a most confusing message when, far from loving enemies, the way we treat even our own is violent and idolatrous? We make war against our brothers and sisters for material goods and in defense of earthly kingdoms. How then will unbelievers recognize the gospel of Jesus or the covenant faithfulness of the one he called Father?

Even when we recount this Christian tradition in the service of Muslim-Christian dialogue, though, we must let it proceed in its own “language,” appeal to its own texts, and begin from its own theological assumptions. Perhaps this will seem risky, because Christians debating other Christians may well find that their strongest arguments rely on the most particular of Christian beliefs and doctrines, which other faiths cannot be expected to share. If nothing else, however, such a strategy is simply honest and transparent. And it is this very vulnerability, which a Christian who seeks to renounce violence must learn from the very particular life and death of Jesus, that may have most to contribute to interfaith dialogue. So I hope to show.

The Case for Christian Pacifism, from the Core of Christian Theology

But to do so I must state frankly: The strongest case for Christian pacifism may well begin in theological convictions that Muslims or others cannot be expected to share. These are convictions evident in the very oldest of Christian creeds or confessions of faith, embedded in New Testament texts: “Crucified and resurrected for us” who are sinners, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Kyrios Christos -- Christ is Lord. This basic confession recurs at the core of the earliest proclamations and hymns embedded in New Testament texts. In fact, this two-word proclamation probably is the earliest Christian creed. Centuries of repetition have now turned “Lord” into what merely seems an honorific title, so that we easily miss its revolutionary claim.

For to say -- as Peter reportedly did on the day of Pentecost -- that God was acting in history to reveal Jesus of Nazareth as “both Lord and Messiah” was to make an extraordinarily powerful claim both in its Jewish religious context and in its Roman political context as well: To proclaim that “Jesus Christ is Lord” meant that this one -- crucified in a gruesome death reserved

for traitors and fraught with political overtones, yet vindicated by resurrection -- this one of all people is the true Kyrios! It was to say that the idolatrous Roman emperor whom his subjects called Kyrios or Caesar decidedly was not. Jesus' own disciples had been longing for God's Messiah to displace the Roman overlord. If this one was the Messiah, then God was fulfilling the longings of the Jewish people -- but in a profoundly disorienting way. For the Jewish disciples of Jesus then to turn around, post-Pentecost, and proclaim the crucified One as Kyrios was to critique the covert idolatry of their own nationalism. They could no longer relish the sacrifice of their enemies' lives in a military victory exalting their own national or ethnic identity over all others. They must now take the faith of Abraham as understood through Jesus out into the Gentile world. But as they did so, their very use of the confession "Jesus is Lord" would be an affront to idolatrous Roman claims on behalf of the emperor who also called himself Kyrios.

To argue that the strongest case for Christian pacifism begins in these core theological convictions of orthodox Christianity is not to dismiss other arguments for the thoroughgoing renunciation of lethal violence, but to locate them properly. Aided by the politically savvy development of Gandhian nonviolence in the 20th century among social scientists such as Gene Sharp,² pacifists have strong arguments about which strategies of social change, peacebuilding and security are actually most effective. But these are secondary supporting considerations. Christian pacifism, anyway, does not finally rest on utilitarian arguments about "what works."

Now, don't get me wrong. Anyone who cares about victims of violence and oppression must certainly care about effectiveness in the pursuit of concrete results. According to Luke 4, Jesus inaugurated his ministry in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth by identifying himself with God's promise in Isaiah 61: The anointed one would bring a message of truly good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and -- in some interpretations -- redistribution of wealth through a new year of Jubilee. Such goals were not other-worldly at all. So how then to achieve them in history?

Jesus did not even announce the goals of his ministry until he had first faced and rejected three temptations in the wilderness. Upon close examination these turn out to coincide with the

ordinary stuff of politics in its standard forms. The tempter's suggestion that Jesus turn stones into bread was a way to appeal, as demagogues do, to the lowest-common-denominators of self-interest on the part of the populace. The tempter's suggestion that Jesus throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and allow God to save him offered a way to manipulate the public through spectacle and shallow celebrity. And when the tempter offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world," the problem was not only that Jesus would have to bow down to someone other than God. No, the very kind of power that the tempter offered was incompatible with God's Kingdom -- the violence of imperial conquest.

These very real political options would tempt Jesus throughout his ministry. When he miraculously fed the people, they wanted to make him king. When he dramatically entered Jerusalem to cleanse the temple he had to go on a humble donkey to avoid misunderstanding. Just when his closest associates expected him at last to marshal a violent insurrection, he refused to kill for the justice of his cause, and instead he died for it.³ It is not that his ministry was apolitical or unmoved by cries for justice and liberation. Rather, Jesus was opting for a qualitatively different kind of politics. His would be truly original revolution. For it broke with the cycles of violence by which one regime after another throughout history has promised justice but recapitulated patterns of unjust domination as they sought their ends through violent means.⁴

The point is not that the power of the cross is merely supernatural or anti-natural. Quite to the contrary, the "wisdom of the cross" that first seemed so foolish brings into focus features of nature and social process that have always been present but that we in our sinful self-absorption might otherwise minimize or miss altogether. Groups lacking access to the reins of power are often the true agents of social change. The apparent powerlessness of their minority status allows them to forge creative pilot projects. They are freer to demonstrate patterns of equity and reconciliation or service for the common good that society-at-large may later adopt. The success of these prophetic or creative minorities is not guaranteed, of course. The very power of their witness may elicit a reaction on the part of those who benefit from status quo structures of power. But to hold fast to the ways of justice while suffering unjustly without

resorting to violence in the defense of one's cause, is to unleash yet another recognizable form of power. This is the power of martyrdom by which the witness of a small committed group or even one individual will sometimes do more to turn the tide of history than all the battalions arrayed to stifle them. Even in times that do not immediately demand moral heroism, the work of maintaining public order and true security arguably belongs far less to warriors than to all the quieter unobtrusive actors who build social capital by knitting together and sustaining bonds of social trust based not on the logic of scarcity or threat but abundance and generosity.⁵

Still, these utilitarian arguments are finally not the decisive reasons for Christian pacifism. Jesus is. It is wise to insist on this point because idealistic pacifists have sometimes discredited themselves by seeming to promise effectiveness in every last case. Yes, every nonviolent practitioner has a right to turn the question of effectiveness back upon proponents of violent military solutions. An honest debate over "what works" requires a single rather double standard. People suffer and die in both military and nonviolent campaigns; the 20th century has left us horrendous casualty numbers that hardly look favorable for militarists. Still, the very dynamic of nonviolence requires practitioners to eschew short cuts in favor of patient, ethically consistent living and acting. For Christians, this means trusting that God in Christ has already won the decisive battle against evil on the cross. The Christian task is therefore to live and act accordingly, confident that we no longer need to secure our own futures nor exact justice for ourselves, because God is at work bringing history to its fulfilment in the gift of God's Kingdom.

Christian Pacifism and Christian Self-Critique

To argue that the strongest case for Christian pacifism begins in the core theological convictions of orthodox Christianity is also to name it as a centuries-long effort to do what Friedman has called for, only among Christians. As important as interfaith dialogue is, we must echo his commentary on the need for intrafaith dialogue among Muslims by insisting that "What matters is not what [Christians] tell [Muslims] they stand for. What matters is what they tell

themselves, in their own languages, and how they treat their own.” Pacifist Christian communities have been in the minority for centuries, but they constitute a lived argument for Christian self-critique. They insist, from the core of Christian theology, that mainstream Christianity must repent of its historical recourse to violence if it is to be true to its Lord.

Jesus himself set the pattern. As Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder argued in his classic work on The Politics of Jesus, when Jesus rejected the political options of his day he was not opting for an apolitical stance. Rather, he was forging a coherent alternative to what turn out to be our most recurring political options. The Sadducee party that represented the priestly aristocracy in Israel cut deals with the ruling Roman overlords in order to insure the “domestic tranquility” they needed to continue the cultic life of the nation and profit from the Temple economy they controlled. The Pharisee party was a renewal movement stressing inner piety based on studious fidelity to the Mosaic Law; their hope was that righteous devotion would permeate outward and thus prepare Israel for God’s Messiah to intervene. The Essenes radicalized both of these first two options as they withdrew into the desert: Combining the Sadducees’ cultic emphasis with the Pharisee’s drive toward renewed purity, they sought to form a purified community preparing for a Messiah who would violently purge the nation of both foreign and internally grown corruption. The Zealots too awaited a Messiah but their preparation was to begin building him an actual army and initiate guerrilla action against the Romans.

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

Leading thinkers in the formative early centuries of the Christian tradition carried forward Jesus' vision of a qualitatively original politics that did not require weapons to sustain the life of the community that embodied it. As the theologians of early Christian centuries made their case for the truth of the Christian gospel, one of their arguments was that prophetic visions in Isaiah and Micah about a coming time of peace were now being fulfilled in the trans-ethnic, trans-national Christian Church. As Ireneus put it, when the apostles preached God's word throughout the known world, they "caused such a change in the state of things, that [people from many nations] did form their swords and war-lances into ploughshares, and changed them into pruning-hooks for reaping the corn, [that is], into instruments used for peaceful purposes, [so that] they are now unaccustomed to fighting, but when smitten, offer also the other cheek."⁶ The reconciled character of the Christian community, bringing together people not only of different ethnicities and cultures but different social classes, was unique enough that some observers began calling Christians a third genus or race, next to the Gentiles and the Jews. Some early Christian writers chafed at this, but even they found ways to affirm that Christians constituted what we might call a transnational nation, living as resident aliens or exiles who could be at home in every nation because they belonged to another homeland.⁷ As an identifiable people, but one spread through the nations as a Diaspora people, they should be able both to transform history and to preserve their identity without territorial control.⁸

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

emperor as incompatible with Christian faith and life.⁹ Yet Christian leaders were soon saying otherwise -- celebrating the ascendancy of Christians into the ranks of civil authority and rationalizing Christian participation in the military.

Christian thought has divided ever since over whether the Constantinian settlement was a victory or a betrayal. In Eastern Christianity, Constantine is a saint. The Roman Church has never canonized him, but a feast day on the church calendar celebrates the basilica in Rome that he offered to the Church. Pacifist Christian traditions, however, often use the term “Constantinianism” as a pejorative for the close cooperation of church and state that they consider a centuries-long mistake. If a consensus exists, it is that Christianity was in fact steadily winning over the Roman Empire and defeating the pagan religious ideology that undergirded it; the open question for debate, then, becomes what to do next at such a juncture. Even those theologians who argue that it would be irresponsible of Christians to refuse government participation often say they need Christian pacifists to continue offering what I have called their “lived argument for Christian self-critique.” Even or especially when the tragedy of human affairs requires an ethic other than Jesus’s own -- they say -- we need the morally rigorous witness of pacifists to prick the conscience of those Christians who dirty their hands making necessary compromises.¹⁰

The medieval period demonstrates both the need and the recurrence of this Christian self-critique. The Constantinian watershed issued in some commendable reforms that could help to limit violence, but also set the stage for medieval Christendom’s most dubious exercises of violence. Christian emperors of the late Roman Empire outlawed the blood sports for which ancient Rome remains famous. They made Sunday a day of rest and discouraged infanticide by providing public funds for raising abandoned children.¹¹ But if Constantine had merely ushered in a period of religious tolerance by legalizing Christianity and lifting persecution, Theodosius soon made Christianity the empire’s official religion. State suppression of pagan practices followed, opening the door to persecution of Christian heretics too. Later, figures like Justinian in the surviving Roman Empire of the Eastern Mediterranean, and Charlemagne in the supposed

restoration of a Holy Roman Empire in the West, centralized power in ways that threatened to subordinate the witness of the church to the interests of the state.¹² And then there were the Crusades, in which popes and mystics alike rallied knights and commoners from throughout Christendom to push back against Muslim control of the Holy Land, but also launched pogroms against Jewish communities en route and even sacked Christian Byzantium. Many people both inside and outside the Christian community have now come to view the Crusades -- together with the Inquisition -- as the worst examples of Christians' use of violence. Christian pacifists would simply add that such phenomena would be unimaginable without all of the intermediate steps and rationalizations that began with Constantine.

Still, the medieval period offers self-critical counterpoints as well. Through the disavowal of wealth and weaponry, monks and mendicants kept alive a vision of Christianity holding true to the gospel model of Jesus and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Monastic communities also played a leading role in what amounts to a medieval peace movement -- the effort to limit violence in Europe by marking certain places off-limits to fighting or by suspending fighting on more and more holy days.¹³ Saint Francis of Assisi seems quite deliberately to have offered an alternative to the Crusades when he travelled to Egypt to visit a Muslim sultan at the very time of the Fifth Crusade.¹⁴ Evidence that the Christian conscience remained uneasy about its accommodation to violence also presents itself in penitential practices that kept soldiers who had shed blood, even in officially just wars, away from Eucharistic communion for varying lengths.¹⁵

As the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century reconfigured the Christian tradition, advocates for nonviolence reemerged. At the hinge between late medieval Catholicism and the Reformation, the Catholic humanist Erasmus called Christian princes to a kind of cosmopolitan pacifism, though he founded no church or movement. Such a movement did emerge from the radical wing of the Reformation among the so-called Anabaptists or "re-baptizers" who voiced a renewed critique of any Christian use of "the sword." Some of the very earliest Anabaptists did participate in the Peasant's War of 1525. But if anything this experience

helped forge the consensus that eventually earned the Anabaptist family of churches -- Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites -- the title of “historic peace church.” The other two groups most commonly listed as historic peace churches are the Society of Friends (or Quakers) and the Church of the Brethren (or Dunkards), which emerged in later centuries. The most obvious impulse for the Anabaptists embrace of nonviolence was their own direct reading of the New Testament, according to a radicalized version of Martin Luther’s principle of sola scriptura -- the authority of the Bible over the pronouncements of any intervening tradition. But the social and political context in which they read the Bible surely shaped their reading, and forged key questions that Christian pacifists have grappled with and debated throughout the modern age.

This was the time when modern nation-states were starting to centralize power, after all, while all kinds of economic and ethnic groups struggled to assert themselves. By severing the tacit bond that had developed in medieval Europe between baptismal and civic identities, the Anabaptists were proposing a polity to sustain group identity that relied on voluntary commitment according to the free exercise of conscience, rather than on the control of territory. Even so, the Anabaptists had to address civil authorities and their questions quite regularly -- sometimes under interrogation, sometimes through appeals for religious tolerance, and sometimes through direct negotiations. As a result, they also faced regularly the question of whether a principled ethic of nonviolence disqualified Christians from any role in the governance of society at large. Although many Anabaptists concluded that principled nonviolence and participation in government were incompatible, a few Anabaptist leaders seem to have held out hope that a prince or magistrate might act as a true Christian.

Quakers have been even more optimistic. The entrance of William Penn into their movement afforded them the opportunity for a “Holy Experiment” in nonviolent government. The pacifist son of a British admiral, Penn inherited the land that became the colony and then the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Quakers governed Pennsylvania for 70 years in a period characterized peaceful relations with the Indians and a policy of religious toleration from which Mennonites and other immigrant groups benefited.

The continuing debate among Christian pacifists over how far they can take consistent practices of nonviolence into public realms might remain completely at an impasse, though, were it not for the witness of a Hindu who found inspiration in Jesus and guidance in his Sermon on the Mount, but who rejected Christianity. Famously describing his development of nonviolent philosophy and strategy as “experiments with truth,” Mahatma Gandhi’s commitment to principled nonviolence led to politically efficacious methods of nonviolent struggle in the first half of the twentieth century. His example thus broke through the impasse between gospel and politics in ways that Christians are still digesting. For if principled rejection of violence and respect for adversaries can actually create political power instead of withdraw from it, then no one may need to choose between sectarian faithfulness and political efficacy at all.

Leaders of Christian diverse traditions have been willing to learn the Gandhian lesson. Two of the most prominent are the African-American Baptist minister Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope John Paul II. King not only brought Gandhian techniques into the civil rights struggle, he inspired a succession of antiwar movements and helped reshape the political discourse of mainstream Protestant churches. John Paul’s leadership was critical in what seemed unimaginable until the cascading events of 1989, which dismantled the Soviet empire and ended the Cold War. The revolution of 1989 was a complex phenomenon with many geopolitical causes, but John Paul himself credited the power of active nonviolence above all others.¹⁶

Debates among Christian pacifists and with non-pacifist Christians certainly continue. Yet John Paul II demonstrates the impact that historic peace churches and other nonviolent Christians have had on the larger Christian tradition. As the year 2000 approached, the pope saw an opportunity to call all Christians to repentance and proclaimed it a year of Jubilee. Chief among his concerns was that “the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance” to review the “painful chapter of history” in which Christians have acquiesced, “especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth.”¹⁷ In a dramatic and unprecedented liturgy at the Vatican on March 12, 2000, the first Sunday of Lent, the pope and leading cardinals led prayers asking forgiveness for actions such as

the Inquisition, those against the Jewish people, sins against the dignity of women, marginalization of the poor, and the Crusades.

Meanwhile, pacifist Christians have increasingly found themselves collaborating with just-war Christians in recent decades. In a striking sign of movement from the just-war direction, Vatican officials such as the future Pope Benedict XVI have signaled that “today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war.’”¹⁸ At least three major factors are responsible for a growing convergence between just war and pacifist Christians. First, the lethality of modern warfare in the twentieth century has led many non-pacifist Christians to ask whether modern wars can ever really meet stringent just-war requirements such as noncombatant immunity. Second, the Gandhian development of politically efficacious nonviolence leads some to ask whether nations themselves must invest in civilian-based methods of self-defense before any claim to have met the requirement of last resort can be serious. Finally, in modern participatory democracy all citizens share responsibility for their governments’ policies, and must have the right to selective conscientious objection when they believe a war or potential war to be unjust, even if they are not absolute pacifists.

Far from requiring Christian pacifists to withhold cooperation from fellow Christians who remain ready to contemplate exceptional circumstances in which warfare might be justifiable, a nonviolence based in Jesus’ person and teachings can both welcome their help in the common work of peacebuilding, and invite their perspectives or mutual critique.¹⁹ At its most basic, the impulse that animates Christian nonviolence is Jesus’ call to love our neighbors and extend such love even to enemies. Love of needy and vulnerable neighbors must welcome all good-faith efforts to reduce violence. What is more, love of enemy must include vulnerability to the truth claims of those very “others” with whom we most disagree. Christian pacifists who are impervious to the concerns of just-war Christians act more ideologically than nonviolently.

So too the Christian who is impervious to the claims of interfaith partners in dialogue. Thus, the lessons of intrafaith dialogue between Christians with divergent perspectives on war and violence loop us back around to the task of interfaith dialogue. Paradoxically, a Christian

nonviolence that begins in the particular narrative of Jesus and the claims he makes upon his followers may actually be more rather than less prepared for honest interfaith dialogue than a theological or philosophical position that thinks it must first construct a supposedly neutral arena of discourse or a supposedly universal framework before dialogue may begin.

Looping Back: Authentic Dialogue as Nonviolence Toward the Truth

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

After all, the assumption of many is that the way to promote peace between religions and civilizations is to minimize our differences in order to highlight our commonalities and identify a few universals upon which all must agree. One version: Stoic and Catholic efforts to identify universal principles of natural law. Another: philosophical liberalism, attempting to construct agreed-upon ground rules for political discourse without relying on metaphysics. Still another: calls to recognize religious pluralism not just as a descriptive reality but as the right way to be religious. None of these proposals is without merit. Yet they regularly falter insofar as each turns out to constitute yet another tradition, rather than a neutral space that is free of all tradition. Covertly, each requires its own kind of conversion away from other worldviews to its own. Such are the conundrums that may arise whenever we sense such an urgent need for new patterns of tolerance, inclusion, and respect that we become proselytizers ourselves -- intolerant of those we deem intolerant.

Whether Christian or Gandhian, a nonviolence that offers alternatives to lethal physical struggle also offers a way of talking with one another that transcends the conundrums we face here. Let us call this mode nonviolence toward the truth.²⁰ In Gandhi's view, willingness to

suffer for the truth already offers persuasive evidence of truthfulness, yet nonviolent practitioners also assume their own fallibility and are fully prepared to allow opponents to prove them wrong.²¹ For the nonviolent Christian, additional reasons for such a stance come from trust that God's strength is made perfect in weakness, that we save our lives only by preparing to lose them for Christ and others. Thus we can also be confident that vulnerability to the truth claims of others need not threaten but paradoxically may strengthen our groundedness in the truth of God and the world. Even a frank proselytism need not be ruled out of court. Nonviolent practitioners want to convert people, after all. Yet they must remember that their commitment to aligning ends with means always requires them to begin with themselves. So they may frankly wish to convince others of their own truth claims concerning nonviolent respect for all human life. But they will not fully have lived according to such a truth until they have made themselves so vulnerable to the truth claims of those others that they cannot rule out the possibility that they instead will be converted. Philosophies of moral relativism and religious pluralism turn out to be surprisingly disrespectful in comparison, because they merely (even grudgingly) tolerate other views, without necessarily requiring themselves to listen hard.

Thus we can be honest. In our present context we both can and should recognize honestly that the faith and legacy of Abraham may be a source of unity -- but is also a source of contention. We may gather around Abraham in a shared hope of finding common ground, but we nonetheless profess rival Abrahamic narratives. Will it help or further complicate this rivalry if a Christian pacifist offers a further gloss on Christianity's own rival Abrahamic narrative?²²

That gloss goes something like this: God's call to Abraham not only launched the drama of salvation history, it charted the continuing plot of that drama by structuring a creative tension into it from its foundational beginning. Blessed with a divinely graced calling, Abraham and his children have a heritage of faith to celebrate and an identity to preserve -- but they are also expected to be a blessing to all nations thereby. Excruciatingly and paradoxically, this is an identity they can lose by veering in either of two opposite directions -- holding tightly to it with an exclusionary siege mentality, or so assimilating that they come to act just like the nations

around them. Much of the drama of the Hebrew scriptures derives from exactly this tension, as Israel struggles to receive liberation and land of promise without becoming new oppressors.

The nonviolent cross of Jesus offers a resolution to the creative tension that comes with being blessed to be a blessing, but it also impresses that tension anew upon the life of the people called Church. Jesus has set into motion his new and original politics by calling forth a reconciled and reconciling people or ummah of peace. Such a people will live in diaspora among all the nations, offering the blessing of Abraham to every family on earth. And that will take Christians back into relationships but also disagreements with many others, beginning with Jews and Muslims. Can we disagree in healthier ways than we have in past centuries? Recall that the proposal here is not that we repress the reality of rival Abrahamic narratives, but rather that we conduct our rivalry in the way of nonviolent service. This will require all of us to assert any claims to be chosen children of Abraham not by holding the blessing of Abraham tightly, obnoxiously, or violently to ourselves, but by living out the Abrahamic legacy as a people for all peoples, blessed to be a blessing, preserving our identity best by placing it at risk for the good of others.

A healthy discourse between the Abrahamic faiths, then, does not hinge on deciding, refuting, or suppressing any people's sense that it is "chosen." And we should be wary of liberal religious pluralism when it alienates believers by disallowing their most deeply held convictions. What we need instead is a clearer recognition that the paradoxical test of chosenness is a track record of living as a blessing to all families of the earth, beginning with service to the other two communities of Abrahamic faith. As the author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews put it, "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Similarly, the Qur'an encourages us that Allah could have made us all into one community, but chose not to do so, "in order that he might test you according to what he has given you -- so compete in goodness." Thus may we evoke the best of one another's traditions. A rivalry that competes in this way is not to be avoided but welcomed, for it will itself be a blessing to all other families of the earth.

Notes

¹Thomas Friedman, “Islam and the Pope,” New York Times, 29 September 2006.

²Gene Sharp, The Politics of Nonviolent Action, 3 vols, ed. Marina Finkelstein (Boston: Extending Horizons, 1973); Gene Sharp, Social Power and Political Freedom, Extending Horizons Books (Boston, Mass.: P. Sargent Publishers, 1980).

³John 6:1-15; Matthew 21:1-17, Mark 11:1-19, Luke 19:28-48; Matthew 26:51-53.

⁴For a fuller elaboration of the political implications of Luke 4, see John Howard Yoder, “The Kingdom Coming,” chapter 2 of The Politics of Jesus, 2d ed., reprint, 1972 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 21–59. The reference to “a revolution that would be truly original” derives from the title essay in John Howard Yoder, The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism, Christian Peace Shelf (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971).

⁵ On this final point, see Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach, eds, At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security and the Wisdom of the Cross (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2005), especially the opening three chapters.

⁶Irenaeus, Against Heretics, book 4, ch. 34.4. See also Justin Martyr, First Apology, ch. 29; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, ch. 90; Tertullian, An Answer to the Jews, ch. 3; Origen, Against Celsus, book 5, ch. 33; Athanasius, On the Incarnation of the Word, section 52. These examples stretch from the second century of the Common Era through the early fourth century. Pacifist scholars have noted the suspicious fact that after the Constantinian settlement, Christian apologists ceased using this argument to vindicate Christianity. See Alan Kreider, The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 27, 52, 64.

⁷Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, chs. 5-6; Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation to the Heathen, ch. 10; The Shepherd of Hermas, similitude no. 1; Origen, Against Celsus, book 8, ch. 75; Pontius the Deacon, The Life and Passion of Cyprian, Bishop and Martyr, section 11; Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 43.49, recounting the interrogation of Basil the Great; Augustine, City of God, book 19, chs. 17 and 26.

⁸See especially references to The Shepherd of Hermas and Origen in the previous footnote.

⁹Alan Kreider, “Changing Patterns of Conversion in the West,” in The Origins of Christendom in the West, ed. Alan Kreider (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 17–21.

¹⁰For a particularly influential example of this approach, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist,” in Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 1–32.

¹¹Robert Louis Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine,” First Things, no. 112 (April 2001): 39.

¹²Thus, Roman Catholics who celebrate Constantine and reject the pejorative use of the term Constantinianism, express analogous worries about the fusion of church and state when they describe Justinian and Charlemagne as examples of the danger of “Caeseropapism.”

¹³Ronald G. Musto, The Catholic Peace Tradition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 71–75.

¹⁴J. Hoeberichts, Francis and Islam (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 4–5, 42–59, 68–75. Francis may well have hoped to preach and convert the Muslims he encountered, although Hoeberichts sees development in Francis' thought as he and his brothers actually lived in Muslim communities. Even if that remained his goal, however, by proceeding non-belligerently through friendship he offered a witness not only to them but to crusader Christians.

¹⁵See Musto, The Catholic Peace Tradition, 57–59; along with primary source documentation in Musto, Catholic Peacemakers: A Documentary History: Volume 1: From the Bible to the Era of the Crusades, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (New York: Garland Pub., 1993), 306–9, 384–90.

¹⁶Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus [On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum], encyclical letter (1991), §22–23. Also cf. §§5, 25, 41.

¹⁷Pope John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente [As the Third Millennium Draws Near], apostolic letter (1994), §35.

¹⁸ZENIT News Service, “Cardinal Ratzinger on the Abridged Version of Catechism” (2003). Also see Civiltà Cattolica, “Modern War and the Christian Conscience,” trans. Peter Heinegg, in But Was It Just? Reflections on the Morality of the Persian Gulf War, eds Jean Bethke Elshtain and David E. DeCosse (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 107–25.

¹⁹For further examples of convergence, collaboration and mutual critique between pacifist and just war Christians, see Glen Stassen, ed., Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War, 1st ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998); Gerald W. Schlabach, ed. and lead author, Just Policing, not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence, with Drew Christiansen, S.J., et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

²⁰Gerald W. Schlabach, “Augustine’s Hermeneutic of Humility: An Alternative to Moral Imperialism and Moral Relativism,” Journal of Religious Ethics 22, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 302, 320, 322–27. Behind the notion of “nonviolence toward the truth” lies the thought and mentoring of John Howard Yoder. Chris K. Huebner has systematically teased out Yoder’s pacifist epistemology in section two of his book, A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2006). Also see Schlabach, “Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder’s Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology,” review essay on The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical by John Howard Yoder and Michael G. Cartwright (ed.), Mennonite Quarterly Review 71, no. 2 (April 1997): 305–9.

²¹Farah Godrej, “Gandhi’s Truth: Nonviolence as Epistemological Arbiter,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (Boston, MA, 2002), [Http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p65025_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p65025_index.html). One might also wish to consult Erik H. Erikson, Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 412–14.

²²For earlier explorations of the meaning of “Abrahamic community,” see Gerald W. Schlabach, “Beyond Two- Versus One-Kingdom Theology: Abrahamic Community as a Mennonite Paradigm for Engagement in Society,” Conrad Grebel Review 11, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 187–210; To Bless All Peoples: Serving with Abraham and Jesus, Peace and Justice Series, no. 12 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991); “Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?” in The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder, eds Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 449–71.