

Chaptre/Chapter 2

Christian Pacifism in the United States: A History and Development since the 17th Century

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This presentation offers a broad survey of the Christian bases for pacifism in the U.S. from the time of the early European settlements in the 17th century until now. Along the way, I hope to provide some clarification of thought regarding the language of pacifism in the U.S. over this extended period.

Although Christian pacifism in the U.S. has no uniform or authoritative theory or ideology, one might view the tradition within three general schools of thought.¹

The “spiritual text” school bases its pacifism on passages from the New Testament, an authoritative work they regard as divinely inspired. This is the general position of peace churches regarded as Anabaptist, which emerged during the Reformation in Germany, France, and Switzerland, many of whom died as martyrs for refusing to kill. Transported to the American colonies in the 17th and 18th century, these Anabaptists were known by various names, including Moravians and Dunkers, Mennonites and Brethren. In their commitment to peace, they emphasized “saving the individual first, while nurturing those who had been freed from the contamination of an unredeemable world.”² In general, they held “that the divide between the ‘City of God’ and the decadent ‘City of Man’ is so severe that it is useless to try to reform the social order.”³

The “spirit of the Bible ethical school,” represented by Jewish pacifists emphasizing the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah, and Quakers (Society of Friends) emphasizing the New Testament, Friends’ peace testimony in 1760 declared their refusal “to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world”; it has informed their commitment to peace ever since. Although Christian in origin, Quakers rely also on “the Inner Light,” a kind of on-going revelation, related to individual religious experience, which has influenced not only their renunciation of war, but also their nonviolent resistance to violence and injustice. The secular peace movement of the early 19th century also embrace the New Testament as a guide.⁴

Finally, there is “the just war school,” based upon Catholic teaching from Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to various modern philosophers and theologians. Now referred to as “nuclear pacifists,” this school maintains that it’s no longer possible to wage war by the standards that just warriors regarded as essential: (a) that just wars must be declared by a public authority, (b) that they must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, and that they must result in better social conditions than those preceding the war. The Methodist Bishops’ Foundation proclaimed in 1961, for example, said that “In the roundedness of shalom, a just-war ethic is never enough. Our churches must nurture a new theology for a just peace.”⁵

These various schools, with some variation, all based their commitment to peace on Christian teachings. Their distinctive or conflicting positions often had to do with their manner of focusing on a personal ethic or a social ethic, on the difference between what one might call

“peace within” or “peace without” or between personal transformation and social change. Although the general public commonly regards the pacifist ethic as primarily personal, many pacifists regard the ethics as relevant to groups, nations, or states. Mulford Sibley, a political philosopher and historian of pacifism, said, “Pacifists by no means ignore power but rather seek to develop nonviolent forms of it.”⁶ Most American pacifists at this time would probably agree with this statement.

As the handout you have suggests, I see the peace testimony in the U.S. as having evolved over the centuries, with a general widening of its implications. In the early days, being a pacifist (although the people of that period did not call themselves “pacifists”) implied a strong commitment of the individual to values opposing war. Increasingly, pacifists commit themselves not only as individual peacemakers, but also as communities engaged in addressing conflict, waging struggle, and altering the priorities of the war-making state.

These “political pacifists,” guided by either religious or utilitarian beliefs, may regard pacifism as relevant not only to individuals, in other words, but also to group or state relations. Seeds of this latter point of view are evident in early Quaker behavior. From the beginning, members of the Society of Friends declined to define themselves apart from the larger community; they regarded the political leaders and rulers, not as necessary evils, but as persons potentially guided by the Spirit.

One might view pacifism, though the word didn’t come into the English until about 1905, with reference to four periods of American history, roughly 1660-1820, 1820-1914, 1914-1960, and 1960-present.

I.

The first period, 1660-1820, reflects the influence of the historic peace churches, especially Mennonites, Quakers, and Church of the Brethren, all of them rooted in European history from the time of the Reformation. The influence of the Quakers, the Society of Friends founded about 1650 in England, came early to the American colonies. A Quaker was probably a Long Island resident by 1654, with two women ministers, Mary Fisher and Ann Austin arriving in Boston in 1656, to be expelled shortly afterward. “The peculiar people,” as Friends were known to the Puritans in Massachusetts, were severely persecuted, “heavily fined, whippings of men and women stripped to the waist, ear croppings and tongue borings.”⁷ After a death penalty was imposed in 1658, the Puritans executed three men and one woman.

By the late 17th century, nonetheless, Quakers were rather well established in what is now Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, with settlements in several other states. Although area around Pennsylvania was obviously not his to give, William Penn’s father gave the land to his son; he settled the region, after writing to Native Americans living there, “We come to live with you in peace.”

Until the end of the 17th century, early Quakers looked forward to emerging victory in what they called the “Lamb’s War,” in which the world would be redeemed by the power through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. For about seventy-five years of their “Holy Experiment,” they helped to govern Pennsylvania. Edward Hicks’ well-known painting, “The Peaceable Kingdom,” based upon a text from Isaiah, pictured that new world in which the lion lay down with the lamb, and all of nature lived in harmony; on the left side of the

canvas, William Penn and his associates stand in a circle, peacefully negotiating and trading with Native Americans.

Their peace testament, unlike that of other peace churches, allowed Quakers to participate in public affairs. They understood the testimony, not as a “legalistic injunction ‘resist not evil,’ but as an intuitional view of the wrongness of war and violence when held up to the Inner Light of Christ.”⁸ This distinction among so-called “pacifists” in the U.S. would increase in importance over the next two centuries.

During this same period, Mennonites, Amish, and shortly, afterward, Brethren, swelled the percentage of the population. By 1776, the new nation counted an estimated 60,000 members of peace churches, the largest numbers being Quakers, among a total population of 2.5 million citizens.

While Mennonites and Brethren continued to accept, in large part, the Anabaptist view of the state, Quakers had abandoned the “Lamb’s War”; they no longer gave up the desire to conquer the world by the power of the Spirit, in favor of a desire to maintain righteousness within the Quaker community. This stance characterized the quietist period through much of the 18th century, until John Woolman, among others, began to challenge slavery by his personal witness and traveling ministry.

By his witness and ministry, Woolman laid the groundwork for Quaker leadership among the abolitionists of in the 19th century. He also challenged Friends to recognize the economic and military implications of their wealth: “May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garment in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.”⁹

II.

Christian pacifism during the second period, from about 1820 to 1914, was influenced not only by the historic peace churches, but also by other Protestant denominations, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Universalists and Unitarians, as well as secular organizations.

Several founders and leaders of the abolitionist movement, for example, were “evangelical” Christians, influenced by two waves of religious enthusiasm in the U.S. during the 19th century. The young William Lloyd Garrison, a Baptist, based his resistance to slavery on a Christian anarchist position, not unlike that of the later Tolstoy (who knew Garrison’s work). And several Quaker women, Lucretia Mott and Abigail Kelley Foster, were major figures in national anti-slavery societies, as well as the women’s movement at that time.

The larger peace movement that emerged in the early 19th century, however, was secularist in disposition. Although much of the rhetoric was religious, the movement, reflecting the war-weary European spirit following the Napoleonic war, relied on arguments associated with rationalist pacifism and universalist ideas of the French Revolution. The effort to prevent war emphasized international treaties and negotiations. The history of pacifism owes much to the abolitionists (William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, the Anti-Slavery Society), but the Civil War rather brutally undermined this whole enterprise.

Garrison, and many others drawn to these movements by their Christian belief, embraced the Civil War as a Holy War. Only Adin Ballou, who, in 1854, with Elihu Burritt, founded one of

the first international peace societies, maintained their anti-war position. In the late 19th century, the state of the pacifist or nonviolent tradition collapsed in the U.S., as Tolstoy and shortly afterward Gandhi assumed leadership positions in this tradition, with a few American disciples. All the while, of course, the peace churches remained faithful to their pacifist teachings, though exerting less influence on the wider community than they had earlier.

III.

The third period, 1914-1960, greatly influenced by that “senseless slaughter,” as Ernest Hemingway called the First World War, the peace churches and various anti-war groups began to organize outside their congregations, establishing offices, publishing periodicals, and lobbying Congress. Conscientious objection to war became a central issue in the build-up to American involvement in the war. During the Civil War, objectors had sometimes bought their way out of active participation, but by 1917, the peace churches had won some recognition of the right to refuse participation in war on grounds of conscience.

Socialists and Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World), reflecting the importance of the labor movement in the history of nonviolence, openly opposed U.S. entrance into World War I.¹⁰ A number of them were persecuted, as the war hysteria unleashed by the Wilson administration posed a major threat to civil liberties, sent many workers to jail, and several to their deaths. Among the pacifist groups dating from this period, several had Christian origins, particularly the Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1914, and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917.

Another effort at international cooperation to abolish war, reflected in the League of Nations, attracted wide attention during the 1920s. The War Resister’s League, founded in 1921, defined itself as a pacifist organization with no religious base.

In the early 1930s, an important new movement (a strange chimera, as Dwight MacDonal called it, with its front quarters in the Marxist movement and its hind quarters in the Catholic church), was based upon the explicit and implied teachings of Jesus. Initiated as a newspaper, the Catholic Worker movement was founded by Dorothy Day, an American radical, and Peter Maurin, an itinerate worker and former religious brother influenced by the Sillon movement in France. Although it would not play a public role in the peace movement until later, the Catholic Worker movement was an inspiration to clergymen and laity early on and a training ground for young pacifists.¹¹ In time, it would be a significant element in the Catholic social teachings of Gordon Zahn and Thomas Merton, as well as the “holy disobedience” against the war in Vietnam of Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and his younger brother, Philip.

Important victories for the peace movement in the this third period included the recognition of conscientious objection, when selective service was instituted in 1940, allowing pacifists to do alternate service, by working in hospitals or similar institutions in lieu of military duty. During World War II, tens of thousands of pacifists from Christian backgrounds went to prison as war resisters. After the war, several ex-prisoners including David Dellinger, and conscientious objectors, James Farmer and Bayard Rustin, assumed leadership positions in the Civil Rights movement, a great training ground for their protégées who became widely known as organizers of major campaigns against the war in Vietnam, and others who are still at the heart of the peace movement in the U.S.

IV.

1960-Present. Over the past forty-five years, pacifism and the anti-war ethic has gathered strength among various Christian denominations, as well as in the larger community, under the influence of Gandhi and Asian religions, particularly Buddhism.

Organizations with bases in all three pacifist “schools” mentioned earlier have resulted in important movements for social change, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, during the Civil Rights Movement. In a real sense, Martin Luther King, Jr. re-claimed for the U.S. a tradition with deep roots in its history. King’s teachers included long-time members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, such as Bayard Rustin, as well as others associated with the American Friends Service Committee.

Many young men who went to jail for civil disobedience for the destruction of draft registration forms during the Vietnam war were members of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, founded in 1964. And in 1983, for the first time in Catholic history, an American bishop’s pastoral gave equal emphasis to the just war tradition and the nonviolent tradition, and argued that Catholic institutions should become centers for peace education and research. Religious pacifists increasingly defined themselves as agents for social change and, through nonviolence training, learned strategies for waging peace.

In a more academic initiative, well-known social scientists, some of them pacifists, co-founded the International Peace Research Association, in an effort to institutionalize peace studies and research in the university.¹² Mennonite and Brethren colleges were among the first academic institution to initiate peace, conflict, and nonviolence programs, followed by Quaker and Catholic colleges about 1970. At present, peace studies is taught in over 300 American colleges and universities, with major university programs and research centers around the world.

Since 1980, activists involved in the Atlantic and Pacific Life Communities and Plowshares, many from Catholic backgrounds and most of them pacifists, have “disarmed” weapons of mass destruction, smashing warheads and pouring their blood over them. Prior to spending years in prison for these actions, they introduced testimony in their trials about international treaties binding the U.S. and condemning weapons of mass destruction as unlawful. Expert witnesses, including major scholars in various disciplines arguing these cases before judge and jury actually won acquittal in several instances.

In the 1970s, other important peace initiatives with religious roots include the Witness for Peace and Christian Peacemaker Teams, who often intervene as international observers, in war zones in Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Iraq, to protect vulnerable populations. And finally, the School of Americas Watch, founded by Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest; this legislative and direct action campaign has succeeded in organizing ten to twenty thousand people at the gates of Ft. Benning, Georgia, demonstrating against training military personnel responsible for death squads throughout Central and South America.

In an informal survey among peace activists, I recently asked what phrase each would choose to identify himself or herself as a person opposed to violence and war. In several cases, they mentioned the possibility of being called a “pacifist,” but every one indicated a reluctance to do so for various reasons. In general, they agreed with the American historian, Howard Zinn, who says he doesn’t call himself a pacifist because the term is too abstract. Undoubtedly

Zinn, as with many war resisters in the U.S. might prefer to describe themselves as nonviolent activists, that is, as people actively engaged in efforts to stop the killing.

Gene Sharp, the major theorist and strategist of nonviolence, is similarly dissatisfied with the term pacifist, which he says tends to close down discussion rather than evoke it. Unlike the verb “to pacify,” meaning literally “to make peace,” the noun pacifism tends to focus more on what one can’t do, rather than what one can do in the face of violence, injustice, or humiliation. For Aldous Huxley, “It has seemed best to state the pacifist case in terms of a series of answers to common antipacifist objections.”¹³

As this brief survey suggests, it’s well to remember “that the pacifist tradition, even when broadly interpreted, is full of contradiction.”¹⁴

Though one can talk about the history of pacifism, the word itself remains rather inadequate to name the concept that defines a range of attitudes against war. Some of that ambiguity originated with the French word, which predates the English term, in Emile Arnaud’s saying that pacifists referred to “friends of peace” as well as “advocates of peace.¹⁵ For people whose commitment to peacemaking is primarily a belief rather than a practice, the word remains useful and accurate. But it hardly does justice to the thousands of activists who daily risk their lives to build cultures of peace in war zones in the inner city or in dangerous settings throughout the world.

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1. I am indebted to Mulford Q. Sibley for his term “schools,” in *The Political Theories of Modern Pacifism*. Ithaca, NY: Pacifist Research Bureau, 1933.
2. Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the U.S. from the Colonial period to the First World War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 14. Also his *Twentieth Century Pacifism*. New York: Van Norstrand, 1979.
3. Joseph J. Fahey, “Varieties of Pacifism,” *Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolence: From Act-UP to Women’s Suffrage*, ed Roger S. Powers and William B. Voegle. New York: Gardner Publishing Inc., 1997, p. 393.
4. David Low Dodge, *War Inconsistent with the Religion of Jesus Christ (1815)*, ed. Edwin D. Mead, Boston, 1905. See Brock, pp. 453.
5. “In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace,” quoted by Walden Bello, *Visions of a Warless World: Perspectives on peace from divergent traditions: the hopes they share, the obstacles they face*. Washington, DC: FCNL Education Fund, Inc., n.d., p. 21. Also John Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972.
6. Mulford Q. Sibley, “Pacifism,” *International Encyclopedia of Social Science*: New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1968, p. 357. Also, Charles De Benedetti, “Pacifism and Peace Movements,” *Encyclopedia of American Political History: Studies of the Principal Movements and Ideas*, ed. Jack P. Green, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984, II, 896-909.
7. Brock, p. 29.

8. Brock, p. 8.

9. Brock, p. 51-52.

10. Michael True, Chapter 4, "Draft Resistance and the Labor Movement, 1914-1940," in *An Energy Field More Intense Than War: The Nonviolent Tradition and American Literature*. Syracuse University Press, 1995.

11. A useful reference on this general topic is Ronald G. Musto, *The Peace Tradition in the Catholic Church: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1987.

12. Examples of peace research and scholarship include Kenneth Boulding, *Stable Peace*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978; Elise Boulding, *Building a Global Civil Culture: Education for an Interdependent World*. Syracuse University Press, 1990; and Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Promise*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 2005.

13. See "pacifism," in *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed., Vol. XI. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 38.

14. *The Pacifist Conscience: Classic Writings on Alternatives to Violent Conflict from Ancient Times to the Present*, ed. Peter Mayer. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967, p. 25,

15. De Benedetti, p. 896.

NOTE ON CHRONOLOGY :

Christian Pacifism in the United States: History and Development from 17th century to the Present

- I.** 1654-1820 The Lamb's War and "Holy Experiment"
Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren, Anabaptists
William Penn, 1644-1718
John Woolman, 1720-74
- II.** 1820-1914 Passive Resistance and Nonresistance
(William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-79)
(Henry David Thoreau, 1817-62)
Lucretia Mott, 1793-1880
Adin Ballou 1803-90
Elihu Burritt, 1810-79
American Peace Society, 1815
- III.** 1914-1960 Nonviolence and Conscientious Objection
Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1914
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915
American Friends Service Committee, 1916

War Resister's League, 1921
Jane Addams, 1860-1935
(Eugene Victor Debs, 1865-1926)
(Congress of Racial Equality, 1942)

IV. 1960-Present Nonviolent Resistance and "Holy Disobedience"

Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1957
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960
United Farm Workers, 1962
Catholic Peace Fellowship, 1964
International Peace Research Association, 1965
Dorothy Day, 1897-1980
Thomas Merton, 1914-68,
Daniel Berrigan, S.J., b. 1922
Cesar Chavez, 1927-93, Dolores Huerta, b. 1930
Martin Luther King, Jr., 1929-68

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