

Toward Realistic Pacifism: John Howard Yoder and the Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Peacemaking

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I had the privilege of knowing John Howard Yoder in the 1990s when he taught theology at Notre Dame and we served together as fellows of the University's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. Yoder had a rather stern and aloof personality, but towards me he was always friendly and engaged. He often asked about my research and previous activist work with SANE (the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) and the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. He placed newspaper clippings or documents about the peace movement in my mailbox, usually attaching a post-it note or a brief comment. At the time I thought he was simply unloading old files, but it turns out that he had a keen interest in peace advocacy and nonviolent action. He thought very deeply about social action methods as effective means of achieving justice and peace.

We have known of Yoder's monumental intellectual contributions to the theology of Christian pacifism, but it was not until recently, with publication of *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, that we came to realize how deeply he also understood the theoretical and practical dimensions of nonviolent action. In these lectures Yoder reveals a thorough knowledge of, and profound insight into, the dynamics of nonviolence. He probes the thinking of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others to examine the core elements of the nonviolent method that contribute to its success. He demonstrates that this method embodies the practical application of principled Christian pacifism.

In this essay I examine Yoder's core insights into the nonviolent message of Jesus and its impact on Gandhi and the development of the nonviolent method. I review Yoder's distinct and uncharacteristically enthusiastic assessment of the importance of nonviolent principles in Catholic social teaching and practice. I focus particularly on his unique interpretation of just war doctrine and its evolution toward pacifism in recent decades in light of the growing viability of Gandhian nonviolence. The essay includes a critique of Yoder's interpretation of the role of religion and

spirituality in nonviolent action. It concludes with an affirmation of Yoder's emphasis on the "science" of peacemaking and conflict mediation, and the importance of our growing knowledge and experience in peacebuilding as evidence of viable alternatives to war.

Jesus' Call to Nonviolent Action

In the Warsaw lectures Yoder repeats his core theme from *The Politics of Jesus* and other works, namely that the Gospels deliver a social message. Not that Jesus is political in the conventional sense, but rather that he came into the world to bring "good news to the poor" and solace for the "least of these." Jesus was a social liberator, the bearer of a new vision of human community. He stood with the poor and the marginalized, not with the powerful and the mighty. He ministered to the sick, the disabled, and the prodigal. He lifted up the persecuted and the meek. He warned the wealthy of the special burden they bear in entering heaven. He said that peacemakers will be children of God, and that we must love everyone, including our enemy. These Gospel messages convey a clear commitment to striving for social justice and transcending violence.

Yoder rejects the conservative religious argument that the Gospels deal only with personal ethics. Sin is not only individual, he points out, but also social. The Gospels call us to work for justice, which means challenging structures of power that reinforce oppression and exploitation. Jesus introduced a revolutionary new way of achieving justice, through forgiveness instead of vengeance. He offered a third way, between quietism and armed revolution (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 91). He did not seek to fashion an organization or an army but rather a new human family, a community of believers committed to seeking reconciliation and love, and willing to suffer for the sake of justice. Nonviolence is at the core of the Christian gospel, Yoder emphasizes.

At the heart of the meaning of Jesus is his teaching of the kingdom of God. At the heart of that teaching is the Sermon on the Mount. At the heart of the Sermon is the contrast between what had been said by them of old and what "I now say to you." At the core of these antitheses is the love of the enemy and non-resistance to evil. (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 21)

The key to the good news of Jesus is that we can be freed from the chain of evil and the deadly spiral of violence engendered by action and reaction in kind. “By refusing to extend the chain of vengeance, we break into the world with good news,” Yoder exudes (*ibid.*, 21). This is not only a theological point but a key element of the political effectiveness of nonviolent action. As Yoder correctly notes, the renunciation of violence has “tactical advantages; it robs the oppressor of the pretext to aggravate his own violence, and it draws the attention of others to the justice of one’s cause” (*ibid.*, 47).

Martin Luther King, Jr. made a similar point in his famous essay, “Loving your Enemies,” where he examines the meaning and the means of following what is arguably Jesus’ most challenging command. It is necessary to love our enemies, King writes, because hate multiplies hate. “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Hate and violence only create more violence. It is necessary to step outside this vicious cycle. “The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars – must be broken,” King insists. Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality. It is as injurious to the one who hates as it is to its victim. It blurs perception and impedes understanding. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We get rid of the enemy by getting rid of enmity, King teaches. Hatred by its nature leads to destruction, but love creates and builds new relationships. “Love transforms with redemptive power.”¹

Jesus and Gandhi

Although of Hindu origin, Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Gospel message of Jesus. He was particularly moved by the Sermon on the Mount, which he considered to be of sublime beauty and importance. He kept a picture of Christ in his office in South Africa and on the wall of his ashram in India. He often read passages from the Gospels before encounters with his Christian adversaries.² He considered Christ the “sower of the seed” of his nonviolent philosophy and method. Gandhi had no recourse to the kind of Christian theological exegesis of which Yoder was a master, but he understood instinctively the transformative power of returning love for hatred, good for evil, and he set about in his public life to harness this force for social uplift.

It was during his early career as a social leader in South Africa, as he was just beginning the struggle over racial oppression against Indian immigrants, that Gandhi first encountered the teachings of Jesus. A Quaker, Michael Coates, introduced him to the Gospels and gave him an intimate understanding of Jesus' teaching of love for all.³ In the 1920s the British Quaker leader Horace Alexander corresponded with Gandhi and visited his ashram in Ahmedabad, India. Alexander helped Gandhi deepen his understanding of Christian pacifism, introducing him to St. Francis of Assisi and recounting the experiences of pioneering Quakers in England and the Americas.

Gandhi's attraction to Christianity was reinforced by his reading of Leo Tolstoy, whose pacifist writings also impressed Yoder. Late in life Tolstoy experienced a profound religious awakening that led him to embrace absolute pacifism. This former Russian army officer and member of the landed aristocracy renounced wealth and condemned war. He rejected violence and urged resistance to state authority, which he understood as based on the threat of violence. A true Christian cannot serve in the armed forces, he argued, but rather should resist militarism with "humble reasonableness and readiness to bear all suffering."⁴ The role of suffering to expiate sin was crucial to Tolstoy, and also impressed Yoder. Suffering is necessary to overcome evil, Tolstoy said. The cross of Jesus brings salvation and conquers sin. In the Warsaw lectures Yoder quotes approvingly Tolstoy's assertion that suffering is the essential element of belief, a core message of the Gospels. Progress in human history, said Tolstoy, is the work of the persecuted. This is the "dramatic and scandalous teaching" of the Gospel, writes Yoder (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 21).

Gandhi and Tolstoy had a brief correspondence at the end of the great writer's life. Gandhi was especially impressed by Tolstoy's message of resistance to social evil. He viewed this as the key to freedom from oppression, an invitation for the Indian people to take collective action against imperial rule. In 1909 Tolstoy wrote a public "Letter to a Hindoo," which Gandhi published in his journal *Indian Opinion*. Tolstoy asserted that the Indian people were responsible for their own subjugation because they allowed the British to maintain colonial domination. Gandhi wrote a commentary on the article's meaning in which he stated that "the English

have not taken India; we have given it to them.” He interpreted Tolstoy’s message succinctly as “slavery consists in submitting.”⁵ To achieve freedom requires mass disobedience and the rejection of colonial authority. Through collective sacrifice, Gandhi wrote, the Indian people could overthrow foreign domination and become masters of their own fate.

Gandhi thoroughly absorbed the teachings of Jesus and was described by Louis Fischer as “one of the most Christlike men in history.”⁶ Dorothy Day paid great tribute to Gandhi in a eulogy at the time of his death. “There is no public figure who has more conformed his life to the life of Jesus Christ than Gandhi, there is no man who has carried about him more consistently the aura of divinized humanity,” she wrote. He was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist extremist “because he insisted that there be no hatred, that Hindu and Moslem live together in peace.” She described him as a “pacifist martyr.”⁷

Gandhi and Christian Social Ethics

Gandhi’s philosophy and method had a profound influence on American Christian pacifists, including Mennonites. The message of nonviolent social action came most directly through Dr. King and the example of the Civil Rights Movement, which were inspired in part by Gandhi. The traditional Anabaptist approach of avoiding conflict and withdrawing from social engagement began to erode in the 20th century as urbanization encroached upon rural Mennonite communities. Many Anabaptists began to feel increasingly uncomfortable and inadequate standing apart from titanic social struggles against war, tyranny, and racial injustice. After World War II these feelings became increasingly widespread and acute. In the 1950s and ’60s a growing number of Mennonites began to yearn for an approach that would allow them to resist social evil while remaining true to principles of Christian pacifism. A pioneer in this quest was J. Lawrence Burkholder, a theologian at Harvard Divinity School and later president of Goshen College. Burkholder questioned the pursuit of perfectionism in an imperfect world and argued that Mennonite ethics “had failed to come to grips with social reality.”⁸ Yoder was deeply influenced by and participated in this debate, and he devoted much of his writing to an argument for the relevance of Christian pacifism and the need for a social commitment to overcoming

injustice and war.

The point of Christian social ethics is not perfectionism, Yoder argued, but a less imperfect world. He acknowledged Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of "immoral society," but insisted that this is not an argument for failing to apply Christian ethics to social challenges. The Christian demands not a condition of perfection, Yoder wrote, but a social order that encourages good and restrains evil, and that makes an imperfect world more tolerable. The purpose of Christian ethics in reference to the state is not to achieve impossible utopias but to strive for what Yoder termed "progress in tolerability."⁹ By denouncing particular evils and devising remedies for social problems, we can help to create a more just world that can please God and improve the well-being of other humans. As Yoder wrote: "Sin is vanquished every time a Christian in the power of God chooses the better instead of the good . . . love instead of compromise. . . . That this triumph over sin is incomplete changes in no way the fact that it is possible."¹⁰

Yoder rejected Niebuhr's Christian realism but accepted his views on the importance of discriminate judgment and action to achieve relative justice. Yoder believed that a rigorous application of Niebuhr's ethical framework "would lead in our day to a pragmatic . . . pacifism and to the advocacy of nonviolent means of struggle."¹¹ Niebuhr was deeply impressed by Gandhi and considered his nonviolent action methods to be morally superior means of exerting coercive pressure to achieve justice. The key to the effectiveness of the Gandhian method, Niebuhr wrote, is its ability to break the cycle of hatred and mutual recrimination that flows from the use of violence. The nonviolent method "reduces these animosities to a minimum and therefore preserves a certain objectivity in analyzing the issues of the dispute." This form of struggle offers greater opportunities for harmonizing the moral and rational factors of social life.¹²

Niebuhr concluded his analysis of Gandhi by appealing to the religious community: "There is no problem of political life to which the religious imagination can make a larger contribution than this problem of developing nonviolent resistance." Niebuhr himself never returned to the subject of nonviolent action, but the religious communities to which he appealed gradually took up the call and over the decades have done much to develop and apply the methods of Gandhian nonviolence. Mennonite

theologians have been especially faithful, led by Yoder, and have made great strides in elaborating the rationale and the methodology of nonviolent resistance.

Catholic Peacemaking

The call to nonviolent action has also gained resonance within the Catholic community, initially within pacifist circles but increasingly in mainstream Catholic social teaching as well. Speaking to a mostly Catholic audience in Warsaw, Yoder devoted a major portion of his lectures to elaborating the multiple varieties of Catholic peacemaking and the rich contributions of Catholic writers and activists to the strengthening of nonviolent principles and practices.

Yoder pays special tribute to Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, which he describes as “a holistic unfolding of the virtues of faith, hope, love, meekness, and the peacemaking and hunger for righteousness to which Jesus’ beatitudes pointed” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 115). The Catholic Worker movement combines hospitality for the poor with activism for social justice. Day was an absolute pacifist who rejected any resort to armed force or form of military service. She retained her pacifist commitment even during World War II, which cost the *Catholic Worker* newspaper many subscriptions and made her the object of widespread misunderstanding and hatred. She was not indifferent to the plight of the Jews or the struggle against Nazism, however. She campaigned against anti-Semitism, especially among Catholics such as the influential Father Charles Coughlin, and she pressured the Roosevelt administration to allow larger quotas for Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in Europe.

Day was one of the earliest opponents of nuclear weapons, organizing public acts of civil disobedience against air raid drills in New York in the 1950s. Her protests were mocked at first, but antinuclear resistance steadily gained support, helping to spark a mass disarmament movement by the late 1950s, embodied in the founding of organizations such as Women Strike for Peace and SANE. Day and her colleagues were also early opponents of the Vietnam War. Day opposed all war but she was particularly appalled by the massive US military attack against that peasant nation. She felt a special responsibility to speak out because of the role of Catholic leaders

such as New York's Francis Cardinal Spellman in advocating "total victory" in Vietnam, and because of the manipulation of sympathy for persecuted Catholics in North Vietnam as a justification for US intervention. Day and her colleagues formed the Catholic Peace Fellowship in the 1960s to organize support for conscientious objection and resistance to war.

Yoder devotes special attention in the Warsaw lectures to the spread of pacifist influence and peacemaking commitments within mainstream Catholicism. He acknowledges the landmark influence of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s and praises John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. This groundbreaking document was addressed to all people of good will, not just Catholics. It linked the quest for peace to the defense of human rights and the pursuit of justice and greater equality among nations. It called for recognition of the "universal common good" and greater acknowledgement of the interdependence of nations. The well-being of one nation, the document proclaimed, is linked to that of all others. The encyclical was unequivocal in condemning the nuclear arms race, and it called for reducing military spending and banning nuclear weapons.

In Warsaw Yoder pays special attention to the 1983 pastoral letter of the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, which was just being released at the time. The letter called for a halt to the nuclear arms race, condemned many of the nuclear weapons programs being developed by the Reagan administration, and urged world leaders to move toward progressive disarmament. In declaring that any use of nuclear weapons is morally unacceptable, even in retaliation, the bishops adopted a nuclear pacifist position directly at odds with the core assumptions of US and international security policy. In so doing, Yoder declared in Warsaw, American Catholicism "entered a new phase of civil courage and pastoral responsibility" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 132).

Former senior diplomat George Kennan called the bishops' letter "the most profound and searching inquiry yet conducted by any responsible collective body" into the relations of nuclear weaponry and modern war.¹³ The pastoral document had a powerful influence on public opinion and helped to inspire and legitimize widespread public activism against nuclear weapons. The role of the Catholic Church and other religious bodies in speaking out against the nuclear danger cast a mantle of respectability over

antinuclear activism and gave a decisive boost to the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the growth of SANE during the 1980s.

The commitment of the Catholic Church to peace and disarmament continues today. The Church condemned the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has played a significant role in recent years in lobbying against new nuclear weapons and supporting further nuclear reductions. The peace witness of the Church has become so deeply rooted that some conservative Catholic writers complain of *de facto* pacifism at the Vatican. The official position of the Church is the just war doctrine, not pacifism, but in practice the Vatican and the US bishops have adopted a quasi-pacifist interpretation of the doctrine. In the Warsaw lectures Yoder praises these developments within Catholicism and the deeper commitment to peacemaking among Christians in general. These are signs of great hope, a “restoration of original Christianity . . . such as has not been the case with the same breadth or depth since the age of Francis. That is the privilege of living in our age” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 120).

From Just War to Pragmatic Pacifism

Perhaps the most significant of the Warsaw lectures is Yoder’s analysis of the evolution of just war doctrine; he provocatively entitles chapter 4 as “The Fall and Rise of the Just War Tradition.” Yoder analyzes the evolution of just war teaching, from its origins as a moral constraint on the conduct of war, through its decline into the age of world war and mass bombing, to the recent revival of ethical concerns for restraining war and reducing nuclear weapons. He expresses respect for the just war position as an ethical framework for deciding if and how military force should be used. “When held to honestly,” he asserts, the just war tradition rejects cynical realism and “articulates restraints which must be observed” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 53).

At Notre Dame during the 1990s Yoder gave occasional lectures on the relationship between pacifism and just war doctrine. I attended one of those presentations and remember vividly the way in which he demonstrated that a rigorous application of just war standards – just cause, right authority, last resort, probability of success, proportionality, discrimination – would make war extremely rare. It would forbid any use of nuclear weapons or other means of mass destruction, and would rule out all forms of large-scale

unilateral military intervention. An honest application of just war criteria reinforces the presumption against war and establishes a moral standard that is very close to pacifism.

Yoder's intention in these Notre Dame presentations was to limit the moral tolerance for armed violence and constrict the space in which war could be considered ethically permissible. He drew a rectangle on the blackboard, representing the space within which military action is rationalized, and then moved the sides of the box inward to illustrate how a vigorous application of the standards steadily compresses the space in which war could be considered permissible. By the end of the presentation only a tiny space remained, a point so small and improbable that it could be considered almost nonexistent. A genuinely just war would be no war at all. Just war and pacifism would merge, or almost so.

In the Warsaw lecture Yoder speaks of a "new paradigm" in which just war standards are taken seriously to arrive at a position close to that of pacifism. He illustrates the point by describing pressures from above and below, which together are narrowing the space in which war could be considered justifiable. The imperative for the new paradigm results from "the convergence of two different limits."

The top limit of justifiable war, the threshold beyond which destructiveness is so great that its use could never be justified, is increasingly pressing in upon us because of the escalation of the destructiveness, the number of weapons, and the difficulty of their control. The lower threshold of "last resort" is rising, so to speak, in view of the increasing availability of international means of mediation and adjudication and in view of greater awareness of the potential of nonviolent means of struggle. (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 61)

Pressure builds from the top because of the increasing destructiveness of modern weaponry and the rising human cost of war. The existence of nuclear weapons and the ever-increasing lethality of weapons technology make war almost inconceivable. Retired British General Rupert Smith flatly asserts that the old paradigm of industrial interstate war among the major powers "no longer exists," rendered obsolete by the extreme lethality of all weapons, nuclear and non-nuclear.¹⁴

Pressure is building from below because of the emergence of nonviolent action as a viable tool for addressing challenges of injustice and oppression. “Gandhi and King have brought to the fore a whole range of new possible instruments of social policy, tools and the struggle for social justice or other morally desirable goals” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 60). New techniques have emerged for resolving the problems of oppression and exploitation that war was supposedly intended to address. Greater knowledge is available for understanding conflict and resolving political and social disputes without recourse to violence. These social and political trends make war less necessary, while emerging technological trends make war less viable. The result is the ‘new paradigm’ in which just war doctrine and pacifism move closer together.

The options for protecting the innocent and pursuing justice are very much wider than conventional political and moral reasoning assume. The growing destructiveness of war has made the use of force increasingly dysfunctional. Nonviolent means have proven to much more effective than many skeptics assume. Together, these trends reduce the space available for “just war” and open up new arenas for constructive social action and effective public policy for resolving disputes without recourse to military means.

The Success of Nonviolent Action

When Yoder lectured in 1983, nonviolent action had already shown its effectiveness in numerous settings, most significantly in the success of the movement for independence in India and in the triumph of the US Civil Rights Movement over racial segregation in the South. Yet political realists still tend to dismiss nonviolence as naïve and unworkable. Nonviolence has been tried and found wanting, they claim. Writer and nonviolent activist Barbara Deming argued to the contrary: “It has not been tried. We have hardly begun to try [nonviolence]. The people who dismiss it . . . do not understand what it could be.”¹⁵ Gandhi said at the end of his life that the “technique of unconquerable nonviolence of the strong has not been discovered as yet.”¹⁶

Organized nonviolence is a new phenomenon in history. Only at the beginning of the 20th century, with Gandhi’s disobedience campaigns in South Africa and India, did mass nonviolent action begin to emerge as a

viable means of political and social change. While examples of nonviolent action can be found throughout history, as Gene Sharp documents, only in the last century has nonviolent action made significant contributions to political change.¹⁷ In recent decades the Gandhian method of strategic nonviolent action has been applied and enlarged upon in a growing number of countries.

Examples of major nonviolent successes are many. The power of nonviolent resistance was displayed dramatically in early 2011 in the unarmed revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, as millions of people poured into the streets to overthrow entrenched dictatorships. The “velvet revolution” of Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s brought down the Berlin Wall and swept away communist regimes across the region. The “people power” movement of the Philippines ended the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Nonviolent resistance was decisive in the latter stages of the South African freedom movement that ended apartheid. Nonviolent movements swept through Latin America in recent decades, ending military dictatorship in Chile and democratizing governments throughout the continent. Nonviolent power led to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia in 2000 and was felt in the Rose, Orange, and Tulip “revolutions” of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003-2005. Mass civil disobedience in Nepal ended the monarchy and restored democracy in 2006. The methods of nonviolent resistance have brought about significant political change and social transformation on every continent.

Recent empirical studies confirm the superiority of nonviolent action as a method of achieving significant social change. A study published in 2008 in *International Security* reviewed 323 historical examples of resistance campaigns over a span of more than one hundred years to determine whether violent or nonviolent methods work better in achieving political change.¹⁸ Each case involved an intensive conflict, sometimes lasting several years, in which major sociopolitical movements struggled to gain specific concessions from government adversaries. The study by Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth employed the most rigorous scholarly methods to examine systematically the strategic impact of violent and nonviolent methods of political struggle. The results decisively validated the greater effectiveness of nonviolent action. The findings show that nonviolent

methods were twice as effective as violent means in achieving success in major resistance campaigns. In the cases examined, nonviolent means were successful 53 per cent of the time, compared to a 26 per cent success rate when violence was employed.

The key factor in explaining this result, according to Stephan and Chenoweth, is that nonviolent campaigns are better able to withstand the repression that inevitably confronts major resistance campaigns, and may even turn such repression to their advantage. When the adversary violently represses a disciplined nonviolent campaign, the nonviolent resisters may benefit politically. This is what César Chávez identified as the “strange chemistry” of nonviolent action. Whenever the adversary commits an unjust act against nonviolent protesters, said Chávez, “we get tenfold paid back in benefits.”¹⁹ Deming described this as the “special genius” of nonviolent action.²⁰ Unjustified repression against disciplined nonviolent action can spark a sympathetic reaction among third parties and in the ranks of the adversary. This may spark loyalty shifts and increase support for the nonviolent campaigners, while undermining the legitimacy of the adversary.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that unjustified brutality against nonviolent action “robs the opponent of the moral conceit” that identifies his interest with the larger good of society. He describes this as the “most important of all the imponderables in a social struggle.”²¹ The willingness of nonviolent campaigners to risk and accept repression without retaliation is fundamental to the political success of the Gandhian method. It alters political dynamics, and tips the balance of sympathy and political support against the adversary and toward the nonviolent movement.

Loyalty shifts are a key mechanism of nonviolent change, according to Stephan and Chenoweth, occurring in more than half the successful nonviolent campaigns studied.²² Hierarchical power systems depend upon the obedience and loyalty of followers. When that loyalty falters, the oppressive power of the command system begins to erode. Resistance movements that generate disaffection in the ranks of the opponent greatly increase their chances of political success.

A Spiritual Discipline?

To withstand pressure and gain sympathy and political support in the face of repression, a nonviolent movement must have iron discipline. No matter how fierce the repression imposed by the adversary, Gandhi emphasized, activists must remain strictly nonviolent. They must not respond with any kind of physical force or even express anger or resentment. The nonviolent campaigner must be willing to suffer for the cause, to take a blow, perhaps many blows, even to face possible injury or death, yet remain resolutely nonviolent. Courage and a willingness to sacrifice are essential, he wrote. Only by overcoming the fear of retaliation can we be free of the power of oppression. The ability to shed fear is the key to gaining freedom.

Yoder asserts in the Warsaw lectures that this fearlessness and willingness to sacrifice require “a religious community discipline so that action will be common and consistent” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 41). In so doing he weighs into a debate among scholars of nonviolent action that continues to this day. Is nonviolence based primarily on principle or pragmatism? Does it require a spiritual and moral commitment, or is it merely a matter of practical choice? Most scholars agree that the willingness to sacrifice is central to the meaning and effect of nonviolent action, but fewer believe that a religious foundation is necessary for nonviolent discipline. Gene Sharp argues that nonviolent action has nothing to do with religious or moral principles. It is simply a preferable form of political action with important pragmatic advantages. It works better than violence and is a more effective and less costly way of achieving social change. Sharp acknowledges the importance of discipline and a willingness to sacrifice. He recognizes that suffering can be a means of overcoming indifference and rationalization, but he rejects the contention that religious principles of pacifism are necessary ingredients of effective nonviolent action.

Yoder gives no indication of having engaged Sharp’s writings on the subject, published initially in his 1971 three-volume study, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Yoder’s approach to the question seems overly didactic. He simply asserts that the willingness of people to sacrifice and incur risk “can only be rooted in a religious vision of the congruence between suffering and the purposes of God.” He believes that nonviolence must be rooted in a religious vision of history: “[B]efore it is a social strategy,

nonviolence is a moral commitment; before it is a moral commitment, it is a distinctive spirituality. . . . It is more a faith than it is a theory, although it is both” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 43).

The modern history of nonviolent action suggests otherwise. As resistance movements have spread and become more prevalent in recent years in multiple settings, they have not displayed the “distinctive spirituality” Yoder considers necessary. Most practitioners of nonviolent action are not motivated primarily by religious discipline. The youth who led the unarmed revolution in Egypt shouted “peaceful, peaceful” as a means of winning the support of the majority population, not as a spiritual commitment. In 1989 the millions of people who poured into the streets of Prague, Berlin, Leipzig, and other European cities were mostly secular. A few activists were religiously inspired, particularly in East Germany, but the vast majority was not. Religious motivations were not evident among the millions who resisted authoritarian rule in Belgrade, Kiev, Katmandu, and many other settings of mass nonviolent action in recent years. Nonviolent discipline was effectively achieved in all these successful struggles, but it arose principally through pragmatic political calculation. Leaders of the resistance movements knew that any resort to the use of violence would have meant certain military and political defeat. They did not wish to give their violent adversaries an excuse to spill more blood and intensify repression. They wanted nothing to do with armed struggle.

The nonviolent revolutionaries of Eastern Europe were particularly clear on this. Having lived through police-state dictatorships with an ever-present threat of violence, they utterly rejected any threat or use of armed force. They were determined to bring about social change in a radically new way. They sought to expand human freedom, not create new structures of oppression. They rejected violence, Václav Havel wrote, not because it was too radical “but on the contrary, because it [did] not seem radical enough.” They believed that “a future secured by violence might actually be worse than what exists now . . . [and] would be fatally stigmatized by the very means used to secure it.” Havel described the dissident movement as an “existential revolution” that would provide hope for the “moral reconstitution of society . . . [and] the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love.”²³ These were moral ideals, but they were understood and applied in a thoroughly secular, pragmatic context.

The “Science” of Conflict Prevention

The growing viability of nonviolent alternatives to war is rooted in the emergence of new possibilities for resolving and transforming conflict. Yoder speaks of “the realism of the message of reconciliation” made possible by the rise of a new “science of conflict” and mediation. A “new set of sciences” is evolving in the discipline of peace and conflict studies, with programs taking root in public and private universities and research institutes around the world. The Kroc Institute is a prime example of this development and is now home to the pioneering Mennonite peace practitioner and theorist of conflict transformation, John Paul Lederach. The development of techniques of conflict management, Yoder declares, provides new opportunities for addressing injustices. It transcends and invalidates past assumptions that violence is the only recourse for resolving intractable differences.

The development of new knowledge and practice for the prevention of deadly conflict necessitates a broadened interpretation of the just war category of “last resort.” If alternative means of resolving differences and avoiding violence are available, this alters the moral calculus of war and eliminates the justification for resorting to armed conflict in almost every circumstance. The emerging mechanisms of conflict transformation and strategic peacebuilding indicate that parties to a conflict can find a means of resolving differences if they are really interested. As John Lennon famously declared, “war is over if you want it.” Yoder captures the same message in theological terms: “The criteria of just intention and last resort . . . interlock. If both parties really want peace, there will be no war” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 60-61).

Social science validates Yoder’s insights about the growing contributions of peace and conflict studies toward resolving armed conflict. We now know a great deal about the causes and cures of war. Democratic peace theory has been validated by empirical studies showing a strong correlation between democracy and peace. Mature democratic societies almost never wage war on one another. As Bruce Russett and others have indicated, strategies to advance genuine democracy can help to prevent war.²⁴ Empirical studies also confirm the link between peace and economic interdependence: heightened trade flows between nations are associated with reduced frequency of war.²⁵ Solid empirical evidence also shows that states

participating together in international institutions—the European Union being the best example—are less likely to engage in military hostilities toward one another.

International institutions not only encourage cooperation among participating states but engage in a wide range of peacemaking efforts in global trouble spots. The United Nations is most active in this regard, and its engagement on behalf of conflict prevention and peacemaking has multiplied greatly since the end of the cold war. Since 1990, according to a study by the Human Security Centre, UN preventive diplomacy missions have expanded sixfold, peacekeeping operations have quadrupled, and the use of targeted sanctions has increased sharply.²⁶ A RAND Corporation study found that many of these UN peace building missions are successful.²⁷ Nongovernmental groups and civil society organizations also engage in a wide range of peacebuilding activities, usually from a bottom-up perspective. Together, these many efforts at multiple levels to prevent conflict are helping to reduce the incidence and intensity of war. Press reports focus on the many failures of international peacemaking, but there are also many successes. The absence of mass killing often means there is no news, which in this context is good news. International institutions and organizations are learning more about what works in preventing armed violence, and their increased engagement in crises around the world has helped to ameliorate and prevent many conflicts.

Social science has also elucidated the links between the empowerment of women and peace. Recent empirical studies indicate that the political, economic, and social empowerment of women is positively correlated with a reduced tendency to utilize military force. A 2001 study in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* found that countries in which women are relatively empowered, as measured by education, professional employment, and participation in government, are less likely to use military force in international relations.²⁸ Many other recent studies have shown that gender equality is a significant factor in reducing the likelihood of armed conflict and improving the effectiveness of peacemaking. Working to empower women is a way to reduce the likelihood of armed conflict.

These and many other empirical studies and accumulated knowledge from decades of international peacebuilding confirm Yoder's optimistic

assessment of the possibilities for preventing armed violence. The emerging science of peacebuilding is showing great promise, although, like the application of nonviolent action, it is still in its infancy. If sustained and developed into the future, the study and practice of peacebuilding promise to teach lessons and develop techniques that will further enhance the realism of alternatives to violence. It is a “theologically sober projection,” Yoder declares, that over the long run we will learn how the values and interests previously defended through military force can be “more economically and less destructively defended through nonviolent instruments” and that violent means of gaining relative advantage will be recognized as increasingly destructive and counterproductive (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 69).

Notes

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” A. J. Muste Memorial Institute Essay Series No. 1, n.d. Sermon delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, 1957.

² Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 84, 333.

³ S. Radharkrishnan, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work* (Bombay: Jaico, 1956), 126.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), 46.

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, preface, “Letter to a Hindoo,” November 19, 1909. Quoted in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 74.

⁶ Fischer, *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 334.

⁷ Dorothy Day, “We Mourn Death of Gandhi, Nonviolent Revolutionary,” *Catholic Worker* (February 1948): 1.

⁸ J. Lawrence Burkholder, “The Limits of Perfection: Autobiographical Reflections,” in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, Conrad Grebel College, 1993), 32-33.

⁹ John Howard Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?” in John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 160.

¹⁰ John Howard Yoder, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29.2 (April 1955): 116.

¹¹ Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?,” 166.

¹² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932, 1960), 248, 250-51.

- ¹³ George F. Kennan, "The Bishops' letter," *New York Times*, May 1, 1983, sec. 4, 21.
- ¹⁴ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 1-2.
- ¹⁵ Barbara Deming, "On Revolution and Equilibrium," in *Revolution and Equilibrium* (New York: Grossman, 1971), 199.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 375.
- ¹⁷ See in particular Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973) and *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 2005).
- ¹⁸ Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," *International Security* 33.1 (Summer 2008): 20.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Flight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement*, ed. Diana Hembree (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 114.
- ²⁰ Deming, "On Revolution and Equilibrium," 211.
- ²¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 250.
- ²² Stephan and Chenoweth, "Why Civil Resistance Works," 21.
- ²³ Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *Without Force or Lies: Voices from the Revolution of Central Europe in 1989-90*, ed. William Brinton and Alan Rinzler (San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1990), 99, 123.
- ²⁴ Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).
- ²⁵ Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 141, 144, 152.
- ²⁶ Human Security Center, *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).
- ²⁷ James Dobbins, et al., *The UN's Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), xv-xxxviii.
- ²⁸ See Mary Caprioli and Mark A. Boyer, "Gender, Violence, and International Crisis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45.4 (August 2001): 503-18.

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