

# Peace theology and peacebuilding

Alain Epp Weaver

“Nonviolence is the way for peace and a good society!” These words formed the refrain of a song sung by the nearly twenty participants in a several-month-long workshop for religious leaders organized by the South Sudanese Organization for Nonviolence and Democracy (ONAD) and sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee. The Lutheran pastor who had composed the song hoped that, with ONAD’s help, it might be recorded and eventually get airtime on South Sudan’s radio stations. Newly independent South Sudan, the workshop participants noted, must confront numerous potential internal conflicts dividing people along ethnic, religious, and other lines. Coming from varied ethnic backgrounds, these Christian and Muslim leaders emerged

from the ONAD workshop convinced that promoting nonviolence as a means for addressing conflict was an urgent necessity for South Sudan.

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*Nonviolence*, for purposes of the ONAD workshop, referred to a variety of conflict analysis, mitigation, and prevention techniques, particular practices accessible to persons from varied religious and ethnic backgrounds. While certainly not value neutral, these peacebuilding practices gathered together by ONAD under the term

*nonviolence* are transportable, able to be carried from one religious or other worldview commitment into another: these nonviolent practices could be used by Christians as well as Muslims (not to mention atheists, Buddhists, communists, and others). Yet when workshop participants shared about what they had learned, they almost all contextualized these practices within Christian or Muslim theological discourse, using not only “secular” terms such

as conflict analysis, conflict prevention, and nonviolence, but also religious ones such reconciliation, sin, grace, God's sovereignty. This was the language they used to describe the nonviolent practices they had learned through appeals to stories and other precedents from the Bible, the Qur'an, and extra-Qur'anic authoritative texts such as the hadith (traditions from and about the Prophet Muhammad) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

### **Distinct disciplines?**

I visited ONAD in April 2013, when I was starting to think about the assignment to write this article, in which I was asked to reflect on the relationship between Mennonite peace theology, on the one hand, and peacebuilding as an emerging academic discipline and set of practices, on the other. Should peace theology and peacebuilding be seen as two distinct and unrelated fields? Or as two fields that occasionally intersect? Or as two fields that stand in unrelieved antagonism to each other?

The first option—which would present peace theology and peacebuilding as so distinct that they have nothing to do with each other—seems clearly misguided. True, the array of diverse peacebuilding practices need not be embedded within theological discourse. In that regard, peacebuilding practices—such as promoting restorative justice, or conducting a conflict or Do No Harm analysis—can be thought of as equivalent to conservation processes in agriculture or best practices in nursing. So, for example, although some conservation methods promoting low-external-input farming—the “Farming God’s Way” approach,<sup>1</sup> for instance—are packaged in Christian theological terms, these sustainable agriculture practices can be learned and implemented by anyone, regardless of theological or philosophical commitments. Similarly, even though Mennonite colleges might underscore how Christian commitments and practices should inform how one acts as a nurse, the best practices of the nursing profession can be learned and carried out by anyone—Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, atheist, or other.

In this sense, basic peacebuilding practices appear to be transportable practices that can be integrated into various forms of theological and philosophical discourse. Yet it is also true that those practices can become deeply embedded in such discourses,

so that to the practitioners the peacebuilding practices appear to be inextricably intertwined with these religious or philosophical convictions. That was certainly the case with the Christian and

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Muslim leaders in the ONAD workshop, for whom peacebuilding practices were bound up with theological commitments. For the Christian participants, being a faithful Christian meant incorporating peacebuilding practices into one's daily life; they viewed peacebuilding as an essential expression of their Christian identity. This fact did not preclude them from recognizing that for their Muslim co-participants, peacebuilding practices also appear to emerge organically from their commitments and practices as Muslims. Peacebuilding practices had become part of the Christian identity of these South

Sudanese Christians in Juba, yet these practices, as the Christian participants themselves recognized, were transportable and could be integrated into other religious (and nonreligious) discourses.

### **Intersecting fields?**

Peacebuilding and peace theology are thus not completely separate, unrelated fields: at a minimum, they intersect at specific points. The ONAD example is but one of perhaps thousands of examples of people and groups for whom peacebuilding practices are tightly intertwined with Christian theological discourse. Not only do the two fields of peacebuilding and peace theology intersect; for at least some peacebuilding practitioners, Christian theology offers the backdrop against which peacebuilding practices make sense—just as for other practitioners, Islamic theology offers the semantic field within which peacebuilding practices have their meaning.

But these points of intersection should not blind us to the fact that peacebuilding and traditional Mennonite peace theology (which in bare bones terms I would characterize as the christologically rooted conviction that Christians should always under all circumstances refrain from taking human life) can sometimes stand in uneasy tension with or even outright antago-

nism to each other. Consider the ONAD workshop participants. Although all the participants emerged from the workshop fully committed to using grassroots peacebuilding practices in their individual lives and within their communities, and although all agreed that peacebuilding practices could help South Sudan grapple with many of its challenges as a newly independent state, none of the participants—Christian or Muslim—were pacifists committed to the proposition that it is always wrong to kill. All would have supported the South Sudanese armed struggle against the Sudanese military, viewing such struggle as a justified form of self-defense, defensible for Christians using just war criteria and representing for Muslims a legitimate form of jihad. At a minimum, adopting peacebuilding practices does not require that one be committed to a stringent pacifism. That observation should not call into question the validity of the types of peacebuilding practices the ONAD participants were learning; it simply underscores the fact that these peacebuilding practices can be used by pacifists and nonpacifists alike.

### **Antagonistic areas?**

From the perspective of Mennonite peace theology, greater concerns surface about peacebuilding as a field to the degree that self-identified proponents of peacebuilding either explicitly endorse armed and potentially lethal actions or appear implicitly to do so. This concern has less to do with grassroots forms of peacebuilding in civil society, and more to do with peacebuilding involving military and other armed actors. For example, so-called humanitarian intervention to prevent or mitigate genocide or other large-scale human rights abuses is touted by its defenders as a form of peacebuilding, a type of action aimed ultimately at violence reduction and mitigation. Such intervention may be championed by proponents of “just peacemaking” and “just policing,” yet from a Christian pacifist standpoint it may ultimately prove indistinguishable from traditional just war approaches. Christian pacifists will rightly welcome having just war proponents take just war criteria seriously, but the rebranding of just war as humanitarian intervention or just policing or peacebuilding does not ultimately overcome the gap between such actions and Christian pacifism.

Christian peacebuilders have also at times engaged military actors with the aim of promoting nonlethal strategies while also championing “whole of government” approaches in which diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives complement military action. At their best, such engagements can be viewed as a form of what John Howard Yoder called “middle axioms,”<sup>2</sup> inhabiting non-Christian discourse in order to promote better outcomes within the operating terms of that discourse—in this case, helping military actors think through less lethal alternatives and strategies. Yet such engagements also run the risk of moving beyond middle axiom-style intervention to active promotion of certain forms of lethal force as the best option, and thus end up as advocacy for a form of justifiable war.

### **Compatible practices?**

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pacifist commitment, most forms of peacebuilding are compatible with a christologically rooted conviction that lethal force is always wrong. Restorative justice initiatives; Do No Harm analyses; trauma healing interventions; nonviolent direct action; the promotion of conflict assessment, circle processes, and other types of grassroots peacebuilding practices: all these can and should be vigorously supported by Christian pacifists—and also by non-Christians and nonpacifists. And, not surprisingly, Mennonites have been at the forefront of the emerging peacebuilding disciplines and practices. It

is not surprising, given the understandable eagerness of Mennonites in the United States and Canada to move beyond the nonresistant stance that seemed to confine Mennonite witness to a sectarian ghetto toward an embrace of activist peacebuilding in which pacifist convictions display their public utility.

So far I have sought to show that while some peacebuilding practices sometimes stand in tension or opposition to rigorous Christian pacifist commitment, most peacebuilding practices at a

minimum are consistent with Christian pacifism and arguably flow from Christian pacifist convictions while not necessarily being peculiar to Christian pacifists. In the remainder of this article I will highlight two dangers or temptations for Mennonite peace theology as it reflects on peacebuilding practice. The first danger I will discuss is the danger of epistemological hubris, of claiming more for nonviolent direct action and other forms of peacebuilding than can be legitimately advanced. The second danger I identify is reduction of the rich Christian vocabulary regarding sin and redemption into the language of peace and violence.

### **The danger of claiming too much**

My first concern stems from a decade of work with Mennonite Central Committee in the occupied Palestinian territories. During that time I repeatedly encountered a form of what I would identify as “peace colonialism” in Mennonites and other Christian pacifists who would visit Israel and the occupied territories and hold forth about how vital it is for Palestinians to engage in nonviolent resistance. They argued that nonviolence would clearly pave the way to Palestinian liberation from military occu-

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pation and from a history of dispossession. Not only did such sermonizing display a telling ignorance of the nonviolent resistance Palestinians have used extensively against Zionist colonization over the course of the twentieth century and up to the present day; it also reflected an unwarranted confidence in the effectiveness of nonviolent direct action as a mode of struggle.

Christian pacifists often rightly accuse proponents of just war of epistemological hubris, of wrongly claiming to know what the outcomes of particular lethal actions will be. Defenders of justifiable killing claim to know that specific courses of action (ones involving the lethal use of force) will result in specific desirable outcomes. The Christian pacifist counters this epistemological (over)confidence with an attitude of humility about human control over history. But a pacifist hubris that arrogantly claims to

know that nonviolence is going to work in a particular situation must be subjected to a similar critique and replaced with a similar humility. The experiences generated and the knowledge compiled by practitioners in the peacebuilding field offer good reasons for hope that in many situations specific peacebuilding strategies will contribute to desirable outcomes. Yet that hope must be tempered with humility about the limits of our knowledge and ability to control the future—and such humility is all the more vital when Christian pacifists privileged enough to live in relatively stable, safe, and prosperous settings are tempted to lecture people living under oppressive regimes on the efficacy of nonviolence as a means of struggle. To be sure, nonviolence has at times, by the grace of God, led to liberating outcomes, but Christian pacifists must soberly acknowledge the real possibility that nonviolent resistance might well lead to tragedy, death, and failure. The rationality of the Christian pacifist's commitment to nonviolence is validated only against an eschatological horizon.

### **The danger of impoverishing our vocabulary**

At least within some Mennonite theological circles, the primary danger is no longer that pacifist commitment will slip away or be treated as an optional addition to core Christian belief, but rather that the rich Christian vocabulary about the human condition and future has been impoverished, reduced to the words *peace* and *violence*. Concerned to show that Christian pacifist commitment need not lead to sectarian withdrawal, some Mennonites have been eager to demonstrate that Christian commitment to peace has practical import for a world scarred by violence. Mennonite peace theologians have in turn eagerly sought to show that peace and overcoming violence are at the heart of the Christian gospel. And to an extent these shifts within Mennonitism in Canada and the United States have been welcome. Yet I worry—and I readily grant that this may be an idiosyncratic perception—that at least for some Mennonite peace theologies the language of peace is now so ubiquitous that it not only becomes synonymous with but even practically replaces the vocabulary of salvation, redemption, and restoration. Similarly the language of violence, rather than representing one instantiation of sin, has practically displaced talk of sin.

My point is not to deny that various forms of violence constitute real forms of sin. Rather, my concern is that reducing sin to violence threatens to externalize the fundamental problem besetting humanity. Since most Mennonites in Canada and the United States are not engaged in (at least overt and public) acts of violence, it becomes all too easy and all too tempting to think of violence as outside ourselves and to conceive of the principalities and powers of this world as external forces with which the heroic community shaped by messianic pacifism must contend. As a result, we fail to recognize the deep brokenness within our churches and families (whether or not it involves violence), and we also fail to recognize the depth of sin within ourselves. We fail to perceive our disordered loves (as Augustine put it), and fail to

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acknowledge that, far from being independent of the powers, we are shaped by them at the capillary level (as Michel Foucault would put it). Failing to recognize the depth of sin and our captivity to the powers and principalities, we delude ourselves in neo-Pelagian fashion into thinking that salvation, now reduced to peace, is within our grasp, something we can achieve on our own.

Again, I readily grant that this interpretation of the Mennonite theological landscape might be idiosyncratic: perhaps it is simply a confession that I have in the past found myself tempted to reduce salvation to peace and sin to violence. But even if I am the only person (and I hope I am) who has been tempted to such impoverished theological language, the lesson I have gleaned from this temptation has broader validity—namely, that although peace and violence should continue to be significant concerns for Mennonite theology, Mennonite theology should have broader concerns. In the words of Peter Dula, we should not allow peace to be the tail that wags the theological dog.

Nonviolence and other forms of peacebuilding are indeed key elements for sociopolitical peace and a good society, as the Christians and Muslims sang together in Juba. And these peacebuilding practices are practices that Mennonites—alongside nonpacifists and non-Christians—should readily embrace and



promote. But all this does not exhaust the good news, the good news that our salvation is not in our own hands but in God's, that it is thanks to God and not to our own actions that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, and that through Christ's death and resurrection and the ongoing work of the Spirit our disordered individual and communal lives are being restored to God's image.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://farming-gods-way.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, Institute of Mennonite Studies Series no. 3 (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1963), 71–73.

## About the author

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