



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

Toward a holistic understanding of peace: the twentieth-century journey.

Author(s): Dalton Reimer.

Source: *Direction* 32 (2003): 3-9.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/468>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

Toward a Holistic Understanding of Peace: The Twentieth-Century Journey

Dalton Reimer

Peace was a much sought-after value in the twentieth century, not only among Mennonites, but in the world at large. Among Mennonites, peace has been a core biblical value from Anabaptist beginnings in the sixteenth century. It remains part of the Mennonite landscape, part of the background scenery if not always in the foreground. Peace tends to become a foreground issue when there is some upset. The twentieth century was a century of much upset, and so peace sprung to the foreground through much of the century, but for different reasons as I shall note.

*A reframing of the meaning of peace in terms of shalom
will help us to see peacemaking in more holistic terms.*

The purpose of this essay is to provide an overview of peace in the twentieth century as a foreground issue, particularly, but not exclusively, as it relates to the North American Mennonite world. Those who wish a more detailed accounting of this journey among North American Mennonites may wish to consult sources such as Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill's *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (1994) and Paul Toews' *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970* (1996).

WAR AND PEACE

Needless to say, war was a central experience of the twentieth century. The two world wars of the first half of the century set the stage. The second of these wars was climaxed with the dropping of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thus ushering in the nuclear age. The "cold war" of the second half of the century followed, along with hot wars such

Dalton Reimer is Senior Associate and Faculty Emeritus, Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies, Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, California.

as Korea and Vietnam. The century ended with a decade of conflicts ranging from war between nations to civil wars to genocides. It was, indeed, a century of war. More than one hundred million persons died as a result of all these wars, exceeding an average of one million per year.

Whatever the isolationist tendencies of Mennonites in the early twentieth century, the military draft made it impossible to avoid engaging the issue of war. Mennonites, historically, have turned to the Bible for answers to questions. The Bible has been likened by Old Testament scholar Phyllis Tribble to a pilgrim wandering through history to which each generation brings its questions. War raised unavoidable questions from early on during the century. And Mennonites, along with other Christians, found their way back to Scripture in search of answers.

My grandfather found his answer to World War I in "nonresistance." In the absence of a conscientious objector alternative to the draft during this first world war, he moved his family, including five sons, from Oklahoma to Vanderhoof, British Columbia. He was not alone in moving his family to Canada for the war. Others, on the other hand, stayed at home. Some of these were imprisoned when they refused to participate in the military. Still others did participate in the military.

World War II brought changes. Mennonites were better prepared to meet the challenges of war. And so, together with others, including the historic peace churches, a conscientious objector service alternative to war was forged in negotiation with the government.

Even so, Mennonites were not united in exercising this alternative. Drawing on several sources, Driedger and Kraybill report that only fifty-five percent of Mennonites drafted in the U.S. and Canada during World War II chose alternative service while forty-five percent chose military service.

Yet while not united in response to war, war had, nevertheless, become the definitive peace question. And that is the point that I particularly wish to make here. Foreground issues tend to dominate the scene. And so war, as a powerful foreground issue, came to dominate the meaning of peace. Phrases like "the peace position" reinforced this war orientation.

In a late-century survey of Mennonites, Driedger and Kraybill found that eighty-one percent of their respondents thought their fellow parishioners still viewed "peace and nonresistance primarily as conscientious objection to war" (214). The 1986 Mennonite Brethren publication, *The Power of the Lamb*, further illustrates the point. Though published late in the century, it is still weighted heavily towards peace as a response to war.

War, of course, remains a most significant peace issue. But peace is more than a response to war. That has become evident as new questions have moved to the foreground during the second half of the twentieth century.

CULTURAL CHANGE AS A SEEDBED OF CONFLICT

Norman Shawchuck has suggested that change is the seedbed of conflict. The amount of conflict generated by cultural change during the past half century would seem to validate his claim. Indeed, I suggest that culture became the key competitor with war as a foreground peace issue during the second half of the century.

As with the earlier issue of the draft and war, Mennonites could not avoid the issue of culture. As interpreters of the Mennonite experience in North America have noted, Mennonites were ushered into a broader engagement with culture significantly because of their experience with war. Mennonites in alternative service and the military during World War II found themselves in new settings and communities quite beyond their more familiar and traditional rural settings. Here they were drawn into a larger engagement with the culture, from which they did not retreat after the war.

In terms of my own experience, I was in high school in the early 1950s, graduating in 1955. My senior year I wrote a research paper on the history of nonresistance in the Anabaptist tradition. The military draft was in effect and, though I do not recall any uncertainty about registering as a conscientious objector, I was interested in this history. Furthermore, conscientious objector status was not automatically conferred by local draft boards, and so one needed to be able to defend one's position. Knowing something of the historical Anabaptist response to war was useful.

While the draft and war were still in the foreground for me, something else was happening in the larger culture. Change was in the air. In 1952 in the United States, for instance, the Supreme Court ruled that movies came under first amendment free speech protection, opening the door to a much broader expression of sex and violence. In 1953 President Eisenhower was inaugurated under the eye of the television camera, but not without competition. The day before on January 19, Lucille Ball gave birth to a baby boy on the same day as her television character, Lucy, gave birth in the series. Over sixty-eight percent of the country's television sets were tuned to *I Love Lucy*, competing with the inaugural events.

A new television culture was emerging. In the same year the first issue of *Playboy* magazine signaled movement toward a sexual revolu-

tion. And in yet the same year, the words *women's liberation* appeared for the first time in the United States in a translated French book. Then there was Elvis Presley and the new music of Rock 'N' Roll. Here were the seeds of the sexual revolution, women's liberation, a new television culture with the likes of Lucy as the new storyteller, and an emerging new music culture. Then in 1955, the year I graduated from high school and began my freshman year at Tabor College, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, and the Civil Rights Movement was on.

The cultural changes of the 1950s continued during the 1960s. The decade began with great idealism, at least in the United States. President Kennedy concluded his 1961 inaugural address with the ringing call to service: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." And he provided the opportunity to serve through programs like the Peace Corps. But the decade soon moved from idealism to confusion and frustration as President Kennedy, to begin with, and then Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. American cities burned as racial tensions exploded. And Vietnam became not just a distant war, but a war on the streets of America as the anti-war movement grew.

MENNONITES AND CULTURE

During the 1960s, the two themes of war and culture came together in a volatile and confusing mix. The mix of the two made it difficult for people, including churches, to discern which of the two they were responding to—war or culture. When long hair is mixed with anti-war sentiments, which is the issue? Post-Vietnam, both war and culture have continued as foreground peace issues, but culture has competed for pre-eminence.

It is significant that as the second half of the century began, the stage for discourse among Christian thinkers about the issue of culture was set by Richard Niebuhr in his seminal work on *Christ and Culture* (1951). He saw five possibilities: Christ Against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, Christ the Transformer of Culture. At this midpoint in the century, he saw Mennonites as an example of Christ Against Culture: "The Mennonites have come to represent the attitude most purely, since they not only renounce all participation in politics and refuse to be drawn into military service, but follow their own distinctive customs and regulations in economics and education" (56).

Niebuhr's characterization has motivated Mennonite thinkers over the past half-century to formulate more accurate and satisfying ways of

describing their understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture. Most recently, Duane K. Friesen (2000) has suggested that "Christ and culture" may be the wrong way of even framing the question. Christ incarnated always implies culture, as he observes, and so perhaps we would do better to speak of alternative visions of culture.

A view of Christ incarnated in culture accompanied by cultural change and the conflict that change brings opens the door to a much larger peacemaking agenda than war. This larger agenda emerged within time in both the larger society and the church. The seedbed of the post-World War II era with its accelerated cultural and political changes of the 1950s and explosive dynamics of the 1960s led finally in the 1970s to new initiatives in peacemaking. Conflict was no longer just a matter of distant wars. Conflict had come to the main streets of North America and could not be ignored. Indeed, these main street conflicts found their way into the church. Issues of music and worship styles, women in ministry, sexuality, and the like could not be ignored. Cultural and societal change moved to the foreground, and new questions emerged that needed to be engaged.

INNOVATIONS IN THE SEVENTIES

The decade of the 1970s was a fertile period of innovation. Conflict resolution emerged as a new language of peacemaking, followed in time by the alternative expressions of conflict management, and, later, conflict transformation. Mediation as an alternative way to resolve conflicts began to grow in popularity. Applications of mediation began to multiply. Peer mediation programs in which children and young people learn to mediate their own conflicts on school grounds began to appear. Community mediation centers emerged in which volunteer mediators from their own communities mediate community conflicts.

In Mennonite circles in the mid-seventies, the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program was birthed in Ontario, Canada, and Indiana, United States, and has since grown into a larger restorative justice movement. In 1979 Mennonite Conciliation Service came into being, and a decade later International Conciliation Service, both in the larger context of Mennonite Central Committee. In 1984 Ron Sider challenged the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France, to establish "a new, nonviolent peacekeeping force of 100,000 Christians" that could be "sent into the middle of violent conflicts to stand peacefully between warring peoples in Central America, Northern Ireland, Poland, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan" (Sider, 250). And Christian Peacemaker Teams came into being, though not yet on the scale that Sider envisioned.

In the 1990s, this broadening of the peace agenda found expression in Mennonite circles in new peace centers and graduate programs at Eastern Mennonite University and Fresno Pacific University, as well as growing undergraduate programs in Mennonite institutions of higher education in both the U.S. and Canada. A parallel development is beginning to emerge in Mennonite institutions internationally.

In brief, the accelerated cultural and societal changes of the post-World War II era of the 1950s and 1960s led in the last three decades of the century to a vastly expanded peace agenda. In some ways, this development was a healthy return to the breadth of the biblical meaning of the ancient Hebrew word *shalom*, often translated as “peace.”

THE PROMISE OF *SHALOM*

In a helpful study titled, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace*, Perry Yoder observes that *shalom* sometimes is used in the Hebrew Bible to “refer to a material and physical state of affairs,” sometimes to “relationships,” and sometimes it has a “moral sense” (10-11). It is a comprehensive term describing a state of well-being, of just and right relationships, of goodness. *Shalom*, together with its Greek counterpart, *eire’ne*, describes a world that is whole, together, and well.

A reframing of the meaning of peace in terms of *shalom* will help us to see peacemaking in more holistic terms—as “salvation, justice, and peace,” to use Yoder’s characterization. It has to do with much more than war. Peace as *shalom* includes peace with God and with each other in all of its manifestations. Culturally we have moved toward a larger understanding of peacemaking, and as Christian peacemakers we do well to connect this cultural movement to the roots of this larger biblical understanding of peace as *shalom*.

Shalom encompasses the whole of our relationship with God and with each other: interpersonally; in our churches, organizations and communities; in our nations; and internationally. It is this breadth that is affirmed in the recently revised Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. And it is this breadth that is now engaging at least some of us in our schools and churches, and that will serve us well as the agenda for the future. ✨

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Driedger, Leo and Donald B. Kraybill. *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994.
- Friesen, Duane K. *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of*

-
- the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2000.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper, 1951.
- Shawchuck, Norman. *How to Manage Conflict in the Church*. Irvine, CA: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1983.
- Sider, Ronald J. "God's People Reconciling." In *Proceedings: Mennonite World Conference, XI Assembly, Strasburg, 1984*, 224-60. Lombard, IL: Mennonite World Conference, 1985.
- Toews, John E., and Gordon Nickel, eds. *The Power of the Lamb*. Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 1986.
- Toews, Paul. *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1996.
- Yoder, Perry. *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace*. Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1987.