In this article we will explore the significance of John Howard Yoder’s *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, delivered in 1983, by way of textual comparison with one of that year’s landmark theological works, Stanley Hauerwas’s *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. In so doing we are entering the burgeoning discussion on the theological relationship between these two figures in order to illuminate the inner dynamics of *Nonviolence – A Brief History*. Our exploration will comprise three parts. First, we survey comparisons that have been made between Yoder and Hauerwas’s ethics. Second, we narrate the arguments of both *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Nonviolence*, looking particularly at how the texts describe (1) what nonviolence is, (2) how nonviolence is enabled and sustained, and (3) what sources inform Yoder and Hauerwas’s nonviolence. Finally, we draw out some of the theological rationale of *Nonviolence* by direct comparison with *Peaceable Kingdom*.

**Yoder and Hauerwas: Connection and Comparison**

A kind of cottage industry has emerged on the Yoder-Hauerwas relationship. Arguments explaining the two authors’ divergent views include their divergent moral psychology, allowance for internal dissent, approval of voluntarism, and posture on Enlightenment liberalism.¹ Less frequent are arguments for their coherence, pointing to their common commitment to nonviolence, and their common rejection of “Constantinian” assumptions of privilege by the church.² While these comparisons are illuminating on various points, they do not quite interrogate the heart of the relationship between Yoder and Hauerwas.

Hauerwas has stated on multiple occasions (with perhaps a bit of characteristic hyperbole) that “everything John Howard Yoder believes, I think is true,” and that “I oftentimes feel I learned everything from John.”³ Naming the totality of what he learned from Yoder over their thirty-plus years
of friendship would be the subject of a monograph. But, instructively, what Hauerwas points to in many of his reflections on Yoder is the intersection of nonviolence and ecclesiology. In his reflections on *The Politics of Jesus*, Hauerwas described Yoder’s work as “based on the life of a community. Nonviolence is a way of life for Christians.” Challenged during his doctoral studies by Yoder’s writings on pacifism, Hauerwas writes that “if I was to trust in God’s providential care of creation through the calling of the church, then I had to be a pacifist. . . . I am a pacifist because, given the way Yoder had taught me to think, I could not be anything else.” It is thus the relationship between nonviolence and ecclesiology that our comparison of these texts will explore.

In 1983, as Yoder was delivering a series of lectures on the nature and heritage of nonviolence to an ecumenical group of Christians in Poland, Hauerwas, his colleague at Notre Dame, was completing and publishing *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In one sense, *Peaceable Kingdom* was a continuation of Hauerwas’s earlier concern for the relationship between moral formation and ethical actions, emphasizing the conditions under which Christian ethical action can be undertaken. But in another sense, *Peaceable Kingdom* marked a relatively new trajectory in his writing, as Hauerwas here offered some of his first arguments on the nature and practice of nonviolence. For Yoder, by contrast, writing on nonviolence in 1983 was hardly breaking new ground, since his published writings on the subject stretch back as far as 1949. In the thirty-four years since then, his engagements on this topic had moved from participating in an in-house Mennonite conversation to including other conversation partners, ranging from proponents of Christian realism to advocates of liberation theology and just war. In 1983, as Hauerwas was beginning his reflections on nonviolence out of a concern for the relationship between hermeneutics and virtue, Yoder was fully entrenched in discussions on nonviolence with various non-pacifist positions.

We now turn to *The Peacable Kingdom* and *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, examining how the authors describe nonviolence and ecclesiology.

**Hauerwas’s Peaceable Kingdom**
Hauerwas’s indebtedness to Yoder in a book designed to “show how
peaceableness as the hallmark of Christian life helps illumine other issues” is acknowledged early and often (e.g. Peaceable Kingdom, xvii). Indeed, it was Yoder’s account of the church and nonviolence that appeared to Hauerwas to be both the culmination of his early work, and a fundamental challenge to Hauerwas’s approach to discipleship.

The more I read of Yoder’s scattered essays, the more I began to think he represented a fundamental challenge to the way I had been taught to think of ‘social ethics’. Surprisingly, Yoder’s account of the church fit almost exactly the kind of community I was beginning to think was required by an ethics of virtue. . . . However, Yoder was a pill I had no desire to swallow. His ecclesiology could not work apart from his understanding of Jesus and the centrality of nonviolence as the hallmark of the Christian life. (Peaceable Kingdom, xxiv, emphasis added)

Here we must investigate what Hauerwas takes to be the connection between ecclesiology and nonviolence. Even from this opening reflection in Peaceable Kingdom, we can see that the primary issue is not nonviolence qua nonviolence but how nonviolence is dependent on and subservient to ecclesiology.

Hauerwas begins his argument for the church as the locus of formation in Christian virtue with observing that formation in ethics requires being shaped by communities of virtue. Stating that “life in a world of moral fragments is always on the edge of violence” and that for Christians defining the ethical life is “based on a kingdom that has become present in the life of Jesus of Nazareth” (Peaceable Kingdom, 5-6), he establishes that nonviolence for Christians must run through ecclesiology. This theme of the church as the locus of moral formation undergirds his essay, which assumes that the church receives a particular kind of peace named by Jesus, and that formation in this peaceability involves not “choices” for or against violence but belonging to a community that embodies this peace as a witness to the world. 

Nonviolence is described in three ways in Peaceable Kingdom. First and foremost, nonviolence is the quality of character that reflects our having found our “place within God’s story” (Peaceable Kingdom, 44); as
we understand the peace of whole existence that comes in trusting others to speak truthfully to us about ourselves and God, we will find ourselves as nonviolent. Violence comes in rejecting the story of trust in God and in embracing a story in which we seek to be agents of control and self-determination (ibid., 48-49). Indeed, peaceableness – of which nonviolence is a part – means bearing witness to the ultimate reality of the universe:

The essential Christian witness is neither to personal experience, nor to what Christianity means to ‘me’, but to the truth that this world is the creation of a good God who is known through the people of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without such a witness we only abandon the world to the violence derived from the lies that devour our lives. There is, therefore, an inherent relation between truthfulness and peacefulness because peace comes only as we are transformed by a truth that gives us the confidence to rely on nothing else than its witness. (Ibid., 15)

Second, and derivatively, nonviolence is a practice that corresponds to what it means to be a part of this community surrounding Jesus (Peaceable Kingdom, 79). Because Jesus’ life is one that “does not serve by forcing itself on others,” Christians live as people of dispossession, as “our possessions are the source of our violence” (ibid., 81, 87). The cross, as the ultimate dispossession – of one’s life and one’s self, is the means by which God has conquered the powers of the world, enabling peaceableness in securing forgiveness (ibid., 87-89). Third, as the quality inherent to Christian community and a practice characterizing disciples within it, the practice of nonviolence becomes the mode of Christian witness outside the church (ibid., 97). As people embodying peace, Christians can have no recourse to violence, as it is not only a betrayal of the community of forgiveness but a rejection of God’s rule of creation.

The church must learn time and time again that its task is not to make the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing to the world what it means to be a community of peace. . . . Christians cannot seek justice from the barrel of a gun; and we must be suspicious of that justice that relies on
manipulation of our less than worthy motives, for God does not rule creation through coercion, but through a cross. As Christians, therefore, we seek not so much to be effective as to be faithful – we, thus, cannot do that which promises ‘results’ when the means are unjust. (Ibid., 103-104)

In articulating what Christian ethics is, Hauerwas contends that it is the quality and practice of nonviolence which exemplifies how this witness is fully developed. Arguing against the “What would you do if …” question often raised by non-pacifists, he asserts that “providence” does not mean that things will work out right, but rather that there is a way of existence which will be maligned but nevertheless exalted in Christ and which “fits with the continuing story of a community’s life with God.” That is, “God’s story cannot be defeated by our attempts to become the authors of this world’s narrative by employing violent means” (Peaceable Kingdom, 127-28). Nonviolence is that quality of a community’s life before God which becomes their primary mode of witness against alternate construals of the world’s origin and telos.

Two points should be made at this juncture. First, nonviolence is not a “thing,” an object to be possessed or an act, but a quality of character that describes a community’s life before God. Second, this posture of nonviolence for Hauerwas is not sustainable apart from a communal vision of God’s activity and intent – namely the church that bears witness to Jesus of Nazareth. Ethics is not a matter of “decision” but of communal formation, and more specifically, a communal formation that speaks of the true narrative of the world (Peaceable Kingdom, 1-12). As Hauerwas puts it, “This love that is characteristic of God’s kingdom is possible for a forgiven people—a people who have learned not to fear one another. For love is the nonviolent apprehension of the other as other” (ibid., 89). This could be predicated of any community, but for him “it is in the church that the narrative of God is lived in a way that makes the kingdom visible” (ibid., 97).

In Peaceable Kingdom, Hauerwas appropriates Yoder’s writings on nonviolence for his own concern for moral formation. Precisely because nonviolence is not a matter of personal ethics but of communal formation, nonviolence emerges as the consequence of engaging the particular narrative of the Gospel, and not by the resources of rationality or any intrinsic human
characteristic (*Peaceable Kingdom*, 12). While nonviolence is named as the central characteristic of peaceable communities, it is ultimately a mode of church existence before it is a practice of witness.

Drawing on Yoder’s work to extend what the substance of communities of moral formation is, Hauerwas writes that

Yoder means to enliven our imaginations, to free us from our assumptions schooled on the presumption of the necessity of violence, to show that it is ‘logically preposterous’ to assume that in such situations we can only choose between the first and fourth options [the attackers going unchallenged and killing the attackers]. (Ibid., 126)

For Hauerwas, only in the church shaped by the narrative of Christ can there be the possibility for ethics that do not entail violence. Christians seeking to “author” the world’s narrative will be inevitably swept up into violence (ibid., 127-28). Yoder’s writings on the nature and practice of nonviolence are framed by Hauerwas’s argument about the nature of communal formation, with the conclusion in *Peaceable Kingdom* that ecclesially-based moral formation around the narrative of Christ must precede a nonviolence of ethos, practice, and witness.

We now turn to Yoder’s own work from 1983 to compare his assumptions about the nexus of ecclesiology and nonviolence.

**Yoder’s *Nonviolence – A Brief History***

Yoder begins his lectures with a jarring observation that marks an intention different from that of Hauerwas: “One of the most original cultural products of our century is our awareness of the power of organized nonviolent resistance as an instrument in the struggle for justice” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 17). Yoder is interested in the development of this nonviolent movement, and devotes the first lecture to providing a narrative of nonviolence so that one might perceive its organic unity. This narrative begins with Leo Tolstoy. Not only does nonviolence find a precursor in Christ, it also has a precursor in the Slavic world of Yoder’s Polish audience. In fact, nonviolence has many antecedents in history, and they are not always identical with what is commonly understood to be the church. Both in the present volume and in other works, Yoder extols the Jewish community for maintaining
nonviolence as a distinctive mark (ibid., 82). While Hauerwas is engaged in describing nonviolence as a practice of the church, Yoder seems content with a broader description that retains a theological perspective by other means.

Yoder’s exposition of Tolstoy highlights further distance between him and Hauerwas. Tolstoy does not adopt nonviolence as part of his communal moral formation but arrives at it as a result of his conversion (Nonviolence – A Brief History, 19-20). He first changed from within as a growing awareness of his own unworthiness overcame him and led him to a change in life direction. He next experienced a change from without when he discovered the “key” to the gospel: the cure for evil is suffering (ibid., 21). From this insight, Tolstoy is compelled to restructure the entire universe of Christian life and thought, developing a counter-cosmology that critiques economic exploitation and imperial domination. Yoder describes this change in cosmology as the conversion that galvanized Tolstoy and sparked nonviolence not only in the Slavic world but elsewhere as well. Under the influence of Tolstoy, Gandhi chose this counter-cosmology and added a certain organizational genius of his own. In turn, Martin Luther King, Jr. was impacted by this counter-cosmology mediated through Gandhi. The resulting organic unity between these luminaries creates what Yoder, echoing the Book of Hebrews, calls the “cloud of witnesses” for nonviolence (ibid., 39).

For Yoder, nonviolence presupposes a distinctive spirituality that comes about as a fruit of conversion and adoption of a counter-cosmology. Nonviolence then becomes a moral commitment for individual who changes orientation. Finally, this moral commitment entails a social strategy of active resistance. Such resistance demands the discipline practiced by a religious community so it can be consistently and coherently demonstrated (Nonviolence – A Brief History, 41). However, it is not clear that Yoder’s religious community operates as Hauerwas’s locus of moral formation. While converted individuals must certainly find a community in which to participate in disciplined resistance, they do so for the sake of a coherent social action based on a presupposed moral commitment, not for the sake of inculcating such a commitment. However, this does not make the community less important for Yoder, as he insists that nonviolence cannot
work in any other way than through communal action. In a later essay, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” he provides more detail regarding individual roles within a moral community. Some people will be agents of direction, memory, linguistic self-consciousness, or order and due process. But it is already becoming clear in Warsaw that individuals who have undergone a conversion make a communal hermeneutic viable by bringing a certain spirituality and posture along with them.

While a conversion to nonviolence entails a new understanding of one’s neighbor and therefore must include a social reorientation, the key to this transformation is readily available in history and in the gospel rather than exclusive to a church. Nowhere is this availability more evident than in Yoder’s lecture entitled “The Science of Conflict” (Nonviolence – A Brief History, 63-72). Here he includes the beginnings of the sociological field of conflict management as part of the organic unity of 20th-century nonviolence. Beginning with general trends in sociology that describe society through models of intergroup conflict rather than stable equilibrium, he interprets various fields of science as moving toward supporting nonviolent resistance as a natural action. From Saul Alinsky to Konrad Lorenz, Yoder is confident that a wide array of research is validating his claim that managing conflict nonviolently is essential to all life on earth.

While both he and Hauerwas insist that nonviolence speaks the truth about the universe, Yoder intends to say this not solely as a theological statement or merely in conjunction with the division between the church and the world. Indeed, for Yoder, “We cannot discuss theology alone. We must constantly interlock with the human sciences, which are talking about the same phenomena from other perspectives” (ibid., 63). There is no room for any kind of dualism that would call such an exchange either unbelief or a confusion of categories.

Regarding the sources for nonviolence, Yoder trots out familiar references after including Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King. As mentioned earlier, he finds nonviolent communities rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. Beginning with the wars of Joshua, the Jewish people have readily understood that Yahweh himself gives victory. The task of the faithful Israelite is to trust rather than to fight (Nonviolence – A Brief History, 75). This understanding continued to guide the Jews as they renounced statehood...
and accepted diaspora under the leadership of Jeremiah (ibid., 80). Turning to the New Testament, Yoder cites arguments familiar to readers of his The Politics of Jesus in order to demonstrate that nonviolent resistance can produce politically significant activity while still remaining faithful to Jesus’ example (ibid., 85-96).\textsuperscript{19}

The product of Yoder’s work is a nonviolent spirituality that can be traced through history, provided we know how and where to look. Those with a disposition toward peace and conflict resolution will more easily discern both the contours of nonviolence in history and its significance. Those from Christian backgrounds will also find this spirituality accessible, but it can also be found in Judaism, in the study of history, or in the social sciences. Nonviolent spirituality is a pluralized phenomenon in Nonviolence – A Brief History, and it need not be isolated to one particular communal expression, whether Christian or otherwise. Furthermore, this spirituality can be affirmed in its efforts by non-theological means. It can be demonstrated not only descriptively (nonviolence as a force in history) but prescriptively as well (a set of practices that can be taught without direct reference to theological values).

Yoder finishes his lectures with an account of current movements within Roman Catholic peace theology. He tellingly begins with describing a spirituality that had begun to pervade some segments of the Catholic church and was most pronounced in the Catholic Worker movement and Dorothy Day. Throughout the three lectures, he is quick to point out how the Catholic peace movement began with this spirituality popular among laypeople before being taken up by Catholic academics operating outside their primary institutional responsibilities and only later appearing in statements from bishops (Nonviolence – A Brief History, 107-20, 121, 130-31). Yoder finishes his lectures with an exposition of liberation theology in Latin America, an example of Catholic peace movements arising despite “the heritage of intellectual and institutional domination of the continent by Catholicism” (ibid., 134).

It is clear throughout that the organic unity which Yoder sees within a brief history of nonviolence entails a different relationship between nonviolence and the church than what Hauerwas envisions.
Conclusion
By placing Hauerwas’s *Peaceable Kingdom* alongside Yoder’s contemporaneous *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, we contend that contrasts between the two help illuminate what is most distinctive about this newly published text from Yoder.

First, in *Nonviolence*, Yoder casts nonviolence as a resistance movement that is accessible to the world and intelligible on its terms. By contrast, for Hauerwas nonviolence is first a disposition of virtue learned in the church before it is an act of witness. Second, Yoder’s lectures speak of nonviolence not as a virtue but as an act, a general nonviolent movement having an organic unity within history. Hauerwas’s essay, conversely, describes nonviolence as first a virtue of ecclesial life. Third, Yoder’s lectures articulate nonviolence as originating with an individual conversion to a particular spirituality or posture, and then leading to the formation of the religious community as an expression of, and a means of, effective organization; Hauerwas’s project emphasizes the formation of the community as prior to engaging in nonviolent activity. Finally, while Hauerwas’s church is concerned with moral formation, Yoder’s religious community of nonviolence organizes and resists.20

While Yoder and Hauerwas agree on both the importance of ecclesiology and the necessity of nonviolence within its composition, this does not necessarily entail either an identical view of what the church is or an identical conception of what the means and sources of nonviolence are. What appears in comparing the two texts is that, while there is some overlap between them in terms of concerns and methods, this does not imply that their projects are the same. Rather, Hauerwas’s primer, describing nonviolence against the backdrop of communal moral formation, envisions nonviolence as intrinsic to the church’s life, while Yoder’s lectures articulate nonviolence in a more plural setting, envisioning nonviolence as arising from multiple vistas. Yoder’s *Nonviolence* highlights this important facet of his influential relationship with Hauerwas – a facet that further illuminates the insights of both thinkers.
Notes


2 Gerald Biesecker-Mast, “The Radical Christological Rhetoric of John Howard Yoder” and Craig Hovey, “The Public Ethics of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas: Difference or Disagreement?,” both in A Mind Patient and Untamed, pages 39-55 and 205-20 respectively.


4 Stanley Hauerwas, “Democratic Time: Lessons Learned from Yoder and Wolin,” Cross Currents 55 (2006): 534-62: “…Yoder’s pacifism constitutes a vulnerable politics not only because it is a politics that demands a sense of what it means to follow Jesus, but also because Yoder refuses to let the church ‘be assimilated into what he takes to be even the most admirable currents of civic nationalism’” (542).


9 Published under the pseudonym Ein Wiedertäufer. “What Would You Do If...?: A Series.” The Youth’s Christian Companion, June 5, 1949, 595; June 12, 607; June 19, 615; June 26,
620; July 10, 636; July 17, 644-45; July 24, 652; Aug. 7, 668.


11 *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), xvii. Hauerwas also thanks Yoder for his criticisms of the work (xiii).

12 Cf.: “Communities teach us what kinds of intentions are appropriate if we are to be the kind of person appropriate to living among these people.” (21)

13 “Peace will come only through the worship of the one God who chooses to rule the world through the power of love, which the world can only perceive as weakness. Jesus thus decisively rejects Israel’s temptation to an idolatry that necessarily results in violence between people and nations.” (*Peaceable Kingdom*, 79)

14 “For it is in the church that narrative of God is lived in a way that makes the kingdom visible. The church must be the clear manifestation of a people who have learned to be at peace with themselves, one another, the stranger, and most of all, God.” (Ibid., 97.)


16 “That model of Jewish pacifism was sustained through the Middle Ages after the Christians had made their alliance with the Caesars and continued to be held until our century. Paradoxically, it was the Jews who through all those centuries most faithfully represented within Europe the defenseless style of morality which Jesus taught.” (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 82.)

17 “Tolstoy is first of all a convert.” (Ibid., 19.)


20 This point is made most clearly by Gerald Schlabach in *Unlearning Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 47-87.

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