Peace and Polyphony: The Case for Theological and Political Impurity

Scott Holland

Introduction

I was answering yet another e-mail about the war when the phone rang. I was greeted by the welcome voice of the old flyer calling from his home in Goshen. He had the current issue of *The Christian Century* and was eager to talk about what my colleague David Johns had said in an article on the Historic Peace Churches' response to the American military action against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan.[1] Johns, a Quaker theologian, had expressed a conflicted and qualified "support of military action" in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

The real, historical tensions between what Johns identified as the peace of Christ and the political possibility of a unilateral disarmament or pacifism in a violent world have preoccupied the old flyer for his entire career. Whether flying humanitarian missions for the United Nations, teaching social ethics at Harvard, or speaking from the president's office at Goshen College, J. Lawrence Burkholder has called religious pacifists to be painfully honest about these tensions, wherever their theologies or political theories might lead them. "I see little acknowledgement of the real historical dilemma we face in any of the Mennonite, Brethren, and Quaker protests of this war," Burkholder complained. I agreed as we talked about the loss of a nuanced two-kingdom theology and the apparent modern pacifist desire for one kingdom.

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Do they really think they can simply make an Anabaptist pacifism into a universal ethics, Burkholder and I wondered aloud over the phone that afternoon. Sharing his concern about the contemporary naïveté around the unmediated and uncompromised imposition of a particular religious confession onto a pluralistic, public, body politic, I sighed with ironic exasperation, "We are all Muslims now." In this essay I will address why I as a preacher and theologian from the Anabaptist heritage must place the values of pluralism, tolerance, freedom, and democracy above the value or ideal of pacifism in my own political discourse and public theology.

My editorial work for the journal *Cross Currents* took me to New York City only five days after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. There was so much sorrow in the city. We at *Cross Currents* and the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life lost our financial account manager when *jihad* warriors crashed the hijacked airliner into the South Tower. Ron Breitweiser, along with ninety-seven of his coworkers at Fiduciary International, perished on the 104th floor. The sense of shock, loss, and grief in NYC that week was unspeakable. Yet before the victims' photographs of loved ones and personal papers scattered by the blasts could be gathered from the city streets, religious peace activists far removed from the scene were writing prophetic and prescriptive missives demanding that the United States not respond with any expression of lethal force.[2] There was, however, a concern expressed that the perpetrators "be brought to justice."

When the bombing campaign against the terrorist network in Afghanistan began, the letters and calls from agencies and institutions in the Historic Peace Church circle intensified, demanding the cessation of bombing without offering any viable nonviolent alternative for the execution of justice and for a sustained protection of the innocent. My Mennonite and Quaker colleagues can analyze and critique their own post-September 11 statements, but I must make a critical comment about my own denomination's response. This criticism extends to my reading of several Mennonite and Friends statements.

The letter from the Church of the Brethren General Board, our denominational headquarters in Elgin, Illinois, is not crafted as a mere confessional statement offering counsel or comfort to our membership; indeed, it addresses the United States government.[3] However, it is filled with citations

from the New Testament and it is heavy with righteous, religious language speaking on behalf of the Brethren God to the president and to America as a pluralistic nation. In this explicitly religious tone it demands "the immediate cessation of military action." This is not the statement of democrats but of liberal theocrats. It seems to work out of a simplistic theocratic longing that collapses the plurality and ambiguity of our late modern geopolitical realities into a hazy vision of a new, one-kingdom theology.

The Christian theological imagination has a long and diverse tradition of thinking about God, world, self, and others within the contexts and categories of a two-kingdom theology. Although the theological constructions of Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, the Anabaptists, Bonhoeffer, or Niebuhr differ greatly on how the kingdoms of this age and the Kingdom of our Lord and God might be imagined in their interrelationships, a productive theological and political tension between the two kingdoms remains in these diverse proposals. This tension helps guard against all easy theocratic temptations by reminding the faithful that although the world is blessed, it remains broken. It likewise signifies that although God's kingdom has in one sense come into history, it also remains a future hope waiting for fulfillment, inviting the believer to live in the creative tension of "the already but not yet" eschatological reality of God's presence — and absence — in space and time. Classical Christianity in its many denominational expressions can thus proclaim a vision of the reign or kingdom of God with a surplus of meaning: "The kingdom has come; the kingdom is coming; the kingdom will come." This assertion functions as a creative limit-language, reminding us that no historical theology or political theory can contain the fullness of God's kingdom. All doctrines, ideologies, and institutions are thus subject to a process of constant critique and revision.

The historic Anabaptist-Pietist theological imagination giving rise to various Mennonite and Brethren groups was at home in a particular kind of two-kingdom theology that had implicit political implications. There was a recognition that the emperor or the state was granted by God the legitimate use of the sword to punish evil and to protect the good, according to civil authority's function as a "minister of God" as outlined in Romans 13 and other New Testament texts. This understanding found early expression in the Swiss Anabaptist Schleitheim Confession, whose sixth article states: "We are agreed as follows concerning the Sword: The Sword is ordained of God outside

of the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and protects the good."[4] The Anabaptists were following a classical theological understanding in recognizing the necessary, if tragic, place of the sword or physical force in maintaining civil society.

However, for these early Anabaptists, the phrase "outside the perfection of Christ" was central to their political and theological understanding. Although they did not protest the emperor's police actions or just wars, unlike their Reformed or Catholic neighbors they could not themselves participate in such physical force or violence, because they followed one who was meek and lowly in heart. Yet their Christ was not a mere pacifist; rather, he was one who embodied a separatist nonresistance in all things. This Christ and his Anabaptist disciples were separated not only from the emperor's armies but also from his politics, economics, education, religion, and morality. He was a king of an upside-down kingdom. The nonviolence of early Swiss Anabaptism, which influenced other expressions of Anabaptism and Pietism, was a refusal to fight drawn not from an isolated doctrine of peacemaking, nor from an ethics of pacifism, nor even from a philosophy of the sanctity of life. Instead, it was a biblical nonresistance funded by a more comprehensive counter-cultural theology of separation from the majority society.

It was the Mennonite-scholar-turned-Episcopal-priest, Orley Swartzentruber, who first called this separation motif in early Anabaptism a type of "married monasticism."[5] These Anabaptists in some ways modeled a kind of Benedictine community and spirituality. They functioned as an alternative religious society with commitments and convictions that separated them from those with a mere earthly citizenship. Much like priests, monks, and nuns, who would not handle any sword of government magistracy and thereby defile themselves with such mundane but necessary matters of the flesh, so the "married monastics" practiced a purist, separatist spiritual and ethical life in the midst of great but fallen societies. Their citizenship was in heaven. They desired to live within the perfection of Christ. Their only sword, according to Schleitheim and other confessions, was the ban of excommunication to separate the one who sinned from the faithful, disciplined community without putting that member to death. Such a theology assumed both a sociological and a theological — if not an ontological — dualism between the gathered community of faith and the mass of fallen humanity.

Indeed, growing up in northeastern Ohio I knew many older Mennonites and Brethren who admirably articulated and practiced a rather consistent theology of nonresistance. Since they could not fight in the emperor's wars as soldiers, neither could they sit in the magistrate's court as jurists, they reasoned. Refusing to conform to the materialism, individualism and arrogance of mainstream religion and culture, they attempted to follow the way of Jesus — simply, peacefully, and together in an alternative community. They would not dream of imposing their Christian discipleship as a moral norm or political agenda onto a fallen world outside of the perfection of Christ. Their theology of nonconformity and nonresistance functioned relatively well when practiced within the context of a rural or small town, a separate, peasant culture life of faith and practice. But what happens when those with such a vision become artists, citizens, and philosophers living in the midst of the troubles and pleasures of the modern public square?[6]

The decision or the historical necessity to become more personally and professionally engaged in broader cultural expressions of life creates an intellectual and spiritual dilemma for most modern sons and daughters of Menno Simons, Alexander Mack, and George Fox, especially around the ideal of pacifism. Many find it intellectually dishonest to live happily in the company of the mass of humanity with the full benefits of citizenship, and then pretend to be "married monastics" only when it comes to the doctrine of pacifism. One cannot live fully in the midst of the art, industry, education, institutions, and civility of the common weal and then retreat to a cultural-linguistic cave to drag out a sectarian, nonresistant deity to speak on behalf of a pacifist public ethics. Many are finding such a strategy for voicing their peace concerns and witness increasingly irrelevant, even irresponsible.

Modern religious pacifists who dial 911 and call the police to protect them from the occasional robber or rapist roaming the placid, tree-lined streets of Goshen, Bluffton, Richmond, or Waterloo quickly understand the dilemma. Likewise, many members of the Historic Peace Churches faced a similar dilemma during the Second World War. A "dilemma," in ethical discourse, presents a choice between alternatives that are equally undesirable. It is the recognition of the limits of perfection and purity in most of our moral choices, especially when we move in our ethical reasoning from the personal to the public, or from the individual to the institutional. When the terrible consequences

of the rise and spread of fascism and totalitarianism became evident, a military response and resistance seemed politically and perhaps even morally justifiable, even to many religious pacifists. However, a number of Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren, and other war resisters of draft age, whose religious convictions made it impossible for them to fight, instead entered Civilian Public Service and did alternative work for the public good in hospitals, agriculture, and forestry. This was in fact alternative *service*, signifying that these peace-loving members of the CPS corps indeed had some *responsibility* to the common weal. Perhaps in terms of their ecclesiology they were not "of the world," but they were living "in" it and thus had some social responsibility as neighbors and citizens. Other pacifists during the WW II era chose different paths as alternatives to military service.

Burkholder, Yoder, and Social Responsibility

J. Lawrence Burkholder was the pastor of a Mennonite congregation in northern New York state as the winds of war were blowing. He was a deferred conscientious objector, but his conscience was not at all at peace. As an astute observer of international politics, he concluded that Hitler was utterly evil and had to be stopped. As a pastor and emerging theologian in the Peace Church tradition, Burkholder had to conclude that turning the other cheek would not shame Hitler and the Nazis into goodness. He saw no viable nonviolent option for stopping the terror of the Third Reich. Thus he had to hope that the war effort would allow the Allies to prevail against Hitler. While Burkholder could preach against war in general, he could not preach against this particular war, nor could he attempt to dissuade his Catholic and mainline Protestant neighbors from supporting it. Further, Burkholder had to ponder his own responsibility to love the neighbor. If Hitler were to prevail, would he as a pacifist not share some responsibility for the death of many people and for the end of humane institutions and a just social order?[7]

Burkholder could not reduce the tension of being a religious pacifist in face of what seemed a justifiable war by retreating into the separatism of a Schleitheim-like form of Christianity. He found Schleitheim's approach to social and cultural life naïve as well as dangerous. It was naive because it assumed that faithful Christians could oppose the general stream of cultural history yet still look to civil society to be provided with an unambiguous,

stable social order in which to live out their daily, domestic lives of devotion to another kingdom. It was dangerous because its pure biblicism, moral perfectionism, and preoccupation with the idea of the Kingdom of God tended to identify God's Kingdom in history with one cultural form of the church.

Neither could Burkholder in good conscience simply become a soldier, because of his spiritual formation as a Christian pacifist. He believed that those who could not fight because of their religious or moral convictions, as well as those who felt that they had to fight to protect just and humane social orders, were both caught in a dilemma, and both were in need of forgiveness. He writes, "I could not assign clean hands to either solders or pacifists. Both need the grace of God. In this respect, my experience was not typically Mennonite."[8]

Eventually, the tension between Burkholder's pacifism and the public case for military protection of innocent people and democratic values became unbearable. He could not live in the tranquility of his pastorate while the world was on fire. In 1944 he read a *New York Times* piece by Theodore White that described in graphic, heartbreaking language the starvation and cannibalism in Honan Province, China, due to the war. Burkholder signed up as a young pilot to fly humanitarian relief missions of food, warm clothing, and medicine into China. He first worked with Mennonite Central Committee and later for the United Nations.

Although Burkholder risked his personal safety as an ethical and honorable expression of alternative humanitarian service, he admits indulging in romantic images of Charles Lindbergh, who had flown supplies into China during the Yellow River Floods of the 1930s. Burkholder confesses that his sense of Christian and ethical obligation to the freezing, starving, and suffering Chinese intersected with a desire for drama, danger, risk, adventure, and heroic sacrifice. How could it be otherwise for one whose heart and mind were awake? The theological reality is always grounded in the human reality.

Burkholder carried this same spirit into his theological reflections as he brought his Mennonite heritage into engaging conversations with others in face of the terrors and tragedies of the war and its aftermath. He contends that Christian *agape* or love cannot be structured unambiguously in society without some compromise, and he argues that "*agape* punctuates, but does not constitute, organized life."[9] At a time when zealous Muslims and Christian

pacifists seem to want to impose their particular vision of God's pure and perfect will onto society, Burkholder's insights on the difference between the ethics of personal relations and corporate or public responsibilities are timely. Indeed, when love confronts the real terrors of history, it does not turn its gaze away from tragic necessity and faithful compromise to some pure, disembodied ideal. His reflections on the classic theology of *simul justus et peccator* — we are at the same time justified and sinners — are also a welcome relief from much of the moral perfectionism and unblemished, prophetic zeal of the contemporary peace church culture. However, I will address only Burkholder's critique of what he has called "a universal christological nonviolence."

An increasing number of people in the Historic Peace Churches, especially since the 1960s, assume that because nonviolence is an absolute principle based on the teachings of Christ, "governments must be told that all policies presupposing violence must be abandoned."[10] Apart from the ugly theocratic temptations inherent in such a theology, Burkholder notes that this position pretends to be politics but is really prophecy. This theology of universal christological pacifism is a shift away from historic teachings of biblical nonresistance, yet it remains entangled in that earlier Anabaptist culture of separation. John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* has done much to promote this confusion between prophecy and politics, according to Burkholder. Yoder and his followers such as Stanley Hauerwas insist that we are not to feel responsible for the outcome of history. We are called to be faithful, not necessarily to be effective. But is this politics?

My old teacher John Howard Yoder made "irresponsibility" a virtue. For him, we are not called to be socially responsible or effective but to be faithful to the politics of Jesus. Burkholder charges that Yoder's "politics" is really a euphemism, because Yoder, in Swiss Anabaptist fashion, rejects participation in the formulation of law, legislation, and its enforcement. In this model of politics, we can and must speak in a morally clean voice but cannot dirty our hands by actually governing. Burkholder asks sharply, "What right has one to prophesy without accepting responsibility for decision-making, management, and accountability?"[11] He is not questioning the so-called pacifism of Jesus but whether Jesus presents us with a real political agenda.

Much like a normative Anabaptist, Burkholder offers a Christology which holds that all human relationships must be judged by their approximation

to *agape*. Yet unlike normative Anabaptists, he insists that in the reality and ambiguity of every historical situation, the ideal of pure love can never be realized absolutely; it must be realized proximately. The Anabaptist academic guild of the 1950s firmly and fiercely rejected both Burkholder and his Princeton Ph.D. dissertation on social responsibility, because he argued for the necessity and importance of *compromise*.[12] Even today, religious radicals, whether of the Christian or Muslim type, will not tolerate this ethical category.

Perhaps one of Burkholder's most helpful yet controversial contributions to our theological thinking about social and political responsibility is found in his realistic christology. He reminds us that simply looking to Jesus as a normative model for politics will not resolve our current historical dilemmas and difficulties, for at least two reasons. First, Jesus was not limited as we are. According to the Gospel narratives, he transcended natural limits. When faced with a food shortage, for example, he performed a miracle. When necessary he could walk on water, and at his command a sick and suffering child was made whole. Second, and more important, Jesus was not representative of normal life; indeed, he was not even representative of ordinary Christian life. He never married or had children, and thus was free from the many responsibilities of family life. He never ran an institution, and therefore he did not have to report to a board or answer to a constituency and negotiate and compromise, which of course is the art of politics. His formal public ministry was short and he died young.

Even as many liberal Christians must smirk at how so many conservative pastors and evangelists make Jesus the champion of American, middle-class family values, some of us Anabaptist realists must shake our heads at how our more radical friends and colleagues so easily extract an international, pacifist politics from this same life. The Jesus of history, it seems, often wrecked domestic life, setting father against son and wife against husband for the sake of God's kingdom. Likewise, this same peasant-poet messiah failed to give the Emperor concrete political advice on how the Roman Empire could be transformed into something that looked more like the kingdom of God, short of becoming an official civil religion (Constantine was to move Christendom in that direction). In contrast, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world."

It is now hard to escape the popular Christian mantra, WWJD — What would Jesus do? From its earliest expression in Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*

to its contemporary restatement on evangelical buttons, through its thunder in some peace activists' prophetic cries, this mantra misses the point of a realistic Christology. The ethics of Jesus, whether in his "hard sayings" with a prophetic edge or in his more theopoetic words from the Sermon on the Mount, presupposed one-to-one, face-to-face relationships in specific local situations of first-century Palestine. The relational ethics and spiritual ideals of Jesus cannot be placed like a public law onto the current, complex geopolitical struggle against international terrorism. What would Jesus do? Some of us must confess that we really don't know.

When faced with this question during the Second World War many Mennonite, Brethren, and Quaker church members discovered that a more profound and prudent question of Christian agency and conscience was, "What must *I* do?" Some had an intellectual understanding, others only an intuitive sense, that the Jesus story had to be mediated and translated to allow it to intersect with their own personal stories of existential and ethical struggle. Some chose the honorable path of pacifist alternative service. Many, many more chose to join the armed forces: as few as twenty percent of Brethren, fifteen percent of Quakers, and fifty percent of Mennonites registered as conscientious objectors.[13]

Some Peace Church historians and theologians conclude that members who served in the military during WW II were merely "moving with the mainstream" with little conscience or conviction. Some were. However, my studies of veterans with roots in the Peace Churches reveal a great deal of conscientious struggle and decision with the hard realities of their historical dilemmas. Several stated that the nonconformity or separation motif that informed their parents' pacifism or nonresistance no longer seemed meaningful for their own more culturally immersed lives. Further, some who experienced the stinging paradox of personal pacifism and public responsibility within their own hearts confessed, "If we felt it was a good thing for Hitler to be stopped with the guns of war, could we also feel it was a good thing for our Lutheran neighbors to risk their lives stopping him while we remained safe here stateside?"

This question was asked by many in my own family. My father and my uncles, as well as several family friends, many of whom had their earliest spiritual training in Canton, Ohio's Maple Avenue Church of the Brethren, became flyers in the B-24 Liberators of the United States Army Air Force. I

was named for an uncle — the artist, intellectual, and peacemaker of the Holland family — who fell in Germany from a sniper's bullet as he was moving in to liberate one of Hitler's camps. I come by my political and theological impurity honestly.

Personal Passion and Public Discourse

During the present war against terrorism, some commentators have been remembering what Studs Terkel called "The Good War," the war against Hitler. My colleague David Johns was not the only Quaker to go public in offering qualified support of American military action against the terrorist network. Fellow Quaker Scott Simon offered stronger, unqualified support. Simon, the host of National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition," argued in a commentary that aired on October 11, 2001 that even pacifists must support this war.[14] He criticized those protesting it, charging that their marches reminded him of a Halloween parade protesting the last war rather than confronting the realities of this one. The protestors, according to Simon, put on old, familiar looking masks in opposition to American imperialism, oppression, and violence. Yet what they were protesting bore no resemblance "to the real demons haunting us now."

Scott Simon worked for many years as a war reporter in Central America, Africa, and the Middle East. Most of the conflicts he covered confirmed his Quaker convictions that war was "rotten, wasteful and useless." But in the 1990s he covered the Balkans. In Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and Kosovo, he confronted the logical, fatal flaw in nonviolent resistance: "All the best people can be killed by all the worst ones."[15] Simon believes this hard truth is what led so many Quakers to enlist in WW II, believing that although pacifism offered wise and strategic solutions for the resolution or transformation of many conflicts, it could not defeat Hitler and his cohorts. Indeed, all the best people would be killed by all the worst ones.

Since most American pacifists understand that Osama bin Laden and the Taliban have a theology that demands a unitary religious state, excludes women from education and work, denies civil and human rights to those who dissent from extremist Islam, and longs to export this theocractic community through *jihad*, Simon asks pacifists what they would propose. Would they want to live in the kind of world the terrorists envision? Would they really hold

the ideal of pacifism above the values of free democratic institutions? With the smoke from the destroyed World Trade Center still rising, he declared, "It is better to sacrifice our ideals than to expect others to die for them."[16]

Although my Christian faith and Anabaptist-Pietist heritage have given me a personal predisposition toward pacifism, I agree with Scott Simon's political analysis. In this connection I recall a conversation I had at the end of the Vietnam War with Jane Fonda, who despite protesting Vietnam had defended her father Henry's service in WW II. I was an eighteen-year-old innocent Anabaptist kid, ready to witness to her on the necessity of a pure and consistent pacifism. I announced, "According to Jesus, all war is sin!" The actress was very gracious and said something like, "That may be, sweetheart, but not all wars are the same." I have come to agree with her. All war might be sin, but not all wars are the same. In fact, all sin might be sin, but not all sins are the same. I sometimes wonder if mature religious leaders who can proclaim pure moral principles without a trace of ambiguity or compromise have tricked themselves into a perpetual state of adolescence in the name of God.

Religious absolutists or puritans, whether Christians, Muslims, or Jews, refuse the art and exercise of discretion. For them, purity of heart seems to mean that the devout must believe only one thing. However, the classical Christian tradition, in reminding us to love God with our minds as well as with our hearts, has given us a mandate as moral agents to make creative and complicated ethical judgements and philosophical distinctions as we reflect upon the dynamic interrelationship of texts, traditions, and embodied human experiences.

I am not suggesting that Christians must be silent or uncritically compliant with the war in its evolution and expansion.The question is about how we enter into public discourse. Do those of us who are Americans enter political dialogue and debate as citizens of a pluralistic democracy, or as religionists representing a God's-eye-view and command? Unless we are prepared to be a kinder, gentler, Anabaptist Taliban, I contend that we must enter the public conversation as *citizens*. Hence, it is important to make an artful distinction between our personal loves and convictions and our public responsibilities. Any easy declaration from religious or political special interest groups that "the personal is the political" is an invitation to violence. Indeed, for many mullahs, the personal must be the political. The imaginative ability to divide the personal from the public in a worldview that makes up in aesthetic coherence

what it sacrifices in moral consistency might be the best hope for a just peace in our world of radical plurality and ambiguity.

Philosopher Richard Rorty addresses the tension between our personal loves and our public responsibilities in his autobiographical essay, "Trotsky and Wild Orchids."[17] There he tells the story of his boyhood love of wild orchids and his left-leaning commitment to social justice. How could self-indulgent love for flowers and commitment to the poor be reconciled? At first Rorty believed he needed either to discover or construct a philosophical, theological, or metaphysical system that would neatly harmonize his personal passion for orchids with a public program to ease human suffering and ensure liberty and equality for all. He finally concluded that he need not harmonize the personal and the public.

This is not to say that at times the personal and the public cannot and do not come together in satisfying ways. They do. Personal, passionate acts of self-creation certainly do influence the shape and substance of our public, communal participation. Nevertheless, Rorty suggests it is good to resist the temptation to reconcile our private obsessions with our public responsibility to others in a pluralistic democracy. For him, a rejection of grand, comprehensive systems is the best way to promote social tolerance and protect against cruelty. He turns to the hopes of a secular, liberal, pluralistic democracy to ensure that all people are treated with civility and that cruelty is minimized through an increased tolerance for diversity. In this model, it really doesn't matter if your fellow citizen shares your particular botanical or moral or theological loves or aversions. In private, one is free to follow one's bliss, enter one's obsessions, or tend to one's personal ethic of self-creation. However, in public, one needs to honor a separate, broader set of ethical distinctions and political obligations to others and to social institutions. In the end, Rorty is convinced that "the ultimate synthesis of love and justice may turn out to be an intricately textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism."[18]

My own work in "public theology" has argued that we must be discrete in moving from our ecclesial confessions to social ethics. Christian theology had its origins when Greek questions were first asked about a Hebrew narrative. Thus, it is never static and it is always culturally contextual. It is never pure. Although its confessions are deeply personal and very particular cultural-linguistic expressions of distinctive, gathered communities of faith, it does not lack public significance. But there is a difference between a theology for the

church and a theological interpretation of culture. As a theologian in the Anabaptist-Pietist heritage I have been formed and informed by the narratives, root metaphors, and practices of my tradition and worshipping community. The gospel of peace has shaped how I view the world. However, as a Christian *and* a citizen, I cannot bring my spiritual vision into productive, public conversation with others in a pluralistic society without some translation, mediation, and compromise. One way to imagine the movement from ecclesial confession to public ethics is through "middle axioms."

A middle axiom is a value that seeks to find some common ground with others, in public life, between one's understanding of "the perfection of Christ" and the complexity of a blessed but fallen world of plurality and ambiguity. It does not impose a confessional gospel upon a polis of multiple confessions and diverse narratives. It is marked by compromise. It is intellectually and spiritually audacious enough to compromise or sacrifice its own purity or high ideals for the possibility of an impure, public peace. Because of our desire for purity and faithfulness, I fear that we as members of the Historic Peace Churches miss many opportunities to join other people of good will around middle axioms in the work for peace and justice. Not all who recognize the limits of pacifism embrace the excesses of American arrogance and self-interest. Many have hopes for international cooperation and community. Since we are no longer married monastics, our public theology must, with risk and adventure, enter into the dilemmas of living and loving in this blessed fallen world.

Theology as Coherence

Much of the intellectual energy in this essay predates September 11. It has its origins in the crisis of Kaduna, Nigeria in February 2000 — a bloody clash between Muslims and Christians that left churches, mosques, schools, libraries, homes, and businesses burned to the ground. At the end of several days of bitter fighting as many as three thousand people, both Christians and Muslims, were dead in the streets. In the aftermath of Kaduna, I was invited to Nigeria in January of 2001 to address a pastors' synod through lectures and sermons on peace, pluralism, and tolerance.[19]

Drawing from the best of my Anabaptist heritage theology of separation of church and state, as well as from secular, democratic political theories of pluralism, I offered proposals for a public theology that would make strategic

distinctions between personal confessions and public responsibilities. This, I suggested, was the best hope for a lasting peace. In public discourse, one must resist all totalities, whether political or religious. They invite only endless ideological conflict and violence. A respectful, thoughtful distinction between the functions of a spiritual mosque or church and a secular state was the most promising way to seek the shalom of the city. This is why, because of my commitment to peacemaking, not in spite of it, I must place the impure values of pluralism, tolerance, freedom, and democracy above fidelity to any pure ideal or absolute, even the ideal of pacifism. Religious prophecy must embrace and kiss the best expressions of social pragmatism when it enters the public square.

Freedom from purity — from the purity of pacifism — frees us from predictability. It can free us from the predictable responses of both religious pacifists and patriotic militarists. Neither offers artful, discriminating agendas for what will undoubtedly be a long, international struggle against terrorism in this century. Good religion, like good art, must be both world confirming and world disconfirming. Religion, like its nearest analogue, art, invites us into spaces of transcendence that allow us to imagine ourselves and our world differently and otherwise. These occasions of self-transcendence are equally important for personal pleasures and for public peace because, in the end, we live only what we dare to imagine.

My theological work in recent years has attempted to bring ethics and aesthetics together in the challenge of naming ourselves and rendering God's name in history. I have become convinced that theology is more about coherence than consistency. The theologian must recognize, with poet Wiilliam Blake, that he who made the peaceful lamb also made the roaring tiger.[20] Blake's striking lamb-tiger imagery is not a child's parable of good and evil but a more complicated theopoetic vision of life's "fearful symmetry." In coming to terms with that symmetry I have also been drawn to the final writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who ultimately moved from a theology of discipleship grounded in moral commands to a theology of improvisation founded by the musical metaphor of "polyphony."[21] Theology, he suggested, drawing analogies from both his training as a classical pianist and his experience in Harlem's jazz culture, is not a neat harmony nor a mere symphony but a polyphony — a musical piece in which two or more different melodies come together in a satisfying way. They do not harmonize — but they do cohere.

Notes

[1] William Vance Trollinger, Jr., "Nonviolent Voices," *The Christian Century* 118.34 (December 12, 2001), 18-22.
[2] For an intelligent, elegant essay on the lack of appropriate lamentation and a rush within the religious peace community to speak prescriptively, see David Johns, "The Silence of Holy Saturday," in *Friends Journal* (March 2002).
[3] "A Resolution on the Events and Aftermath of September 11," by the Church of the Brethren General Board. Available from the General Board Offices, 1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, Illinois 60120-8039.
[4] James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972), 120-21.
[5] A. Orley Swartzentruber, "Reflections from the Concern Movement," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 8.2 (Spring 1990): 193-200.
[6] General Conference Mennonite theologian Duane K. Friesen offers one possible theology of Anabaptist cultural engagement in his *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000).
[7] Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo, ON: The Institute of Mennonite Studies and Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1993).
[8] *Ibid*., 5.
[9] *Ibid*., 8-10.
[10] J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Mennonites on the Way to Peace," *The Gospel Herald* (February 19, 1991): 3.
[11] *The Limits of Perfection,* 47.
[12] Burkholder's dissertation was finally published decades after its defense: J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989).
[13] For a more complete discussion of this, see my "New Starting Points in the Ecumenical Peace Dialogue," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Summer 2000).
[14] Scott Simon,"When We Must Fight," October 11, 2001 on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition with Scott Simon" (Copyright 2001, Dow Jones and Company).
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 3-20.
[18] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical* Papers, *Volume 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 209
[19] For an essay describing my work in Nigeria, see my "The Gospel of Peace and the Violence of God," *Cross Currents* (forthcoming, Spring 2002).
[20] David V. Erdman, ed., commentary by Harold Bloom, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William* Blake (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982), 25. Blake asks, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee [the Tyger]?" and also, "What immortal hand or eye, / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"
[21] For an extended treatment of this move from *Nachfolge* or discipleship to the metaphor of polyphony, see my "First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin: Bonhoeffer's New York," *Cross Currents* 50.3 (Fall 2000): 369-82.