

How Did We Get Here?

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This issue of *CGR* contains some of the most philosophically and theologically diverse articles ever included in a single edition. Strong differences of opinion exist between people who identify or worship with an Anabaptist congregation about the roles that law and policing play in building and sustaining a democratic society. Even sharper disagreements appear over whether a police officer should be allowed to join or remain a member of an Anabaptist congregation in good standing.

This issue includes several essays which argue that policing is a profession that cannot be carried out in a manner compatible with Anabaptist theology. Policing is inherently violent, several articles argue. Essays from three present and former police officers who worship with a Mennonite or Brethren in Christ congregation counter that they have carried out their professional duties in a manner consistent with their faith. While recognizing there is indeed violence within the orbit of policing, they contend that policing is an essential ingredient for peace.

Supplementing and surrounding these perspectives are essays that raise troubling questions and complicate the discussion. Rather than arguing that policing is either good or bad, many of these papers suggest there are important nuances and distinctions that affect how Anabaptists should evaluate police functions. As a consequence, readers looking for this *CGR* issue to definitively resolve the question of how policing relates to peace theology will be disappointed. The only conclusion that clearly emerges from this collection is that the conversation needs to go forward in a way that will aid historic peace churches and their members better understand how peace theology does, and should, apply to policing in our increasingly complex world.

Origin of the Conversation

The origin of this particular conversation can be traced to May 13, 1999, when several busloads of concerned Canadians from Southern Ontario,

predominantly Mennonite, traveled from Kitchener to Ottawa. The purpose of this trip was to gather and collectively sing and pray for peace in the shadow of the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill. In late March, NATO, in response to Serbian actions in Kosovo, had begun an approximately 80-day bombing campaign in the former Yugoslavia for the stated purpose of protecting human rights. It was clear from media and refugee reports that massive human rights violations were taking place in Kosovo, and that these atrocities had the approval or acquiescence of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

On Parliament Hill, our group, which had expanded to include several hundred boys, girls, men, and women, sang or read 18 songs. Prayers for peace were offered, and a letter to the Government of Canada was read. We concluded by singing “God of Grace and God of Glory,” which fittingly calls on God to “cure thy children’s warring madness . . . save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.” During the ensuing six-hour bus ride home, a number of us talked for hours about our unsettled feelings. While I don’t recall that anyone on our bus supported NATO’s bombing campaign, we were equally troubled that singing and praying in the face of horrific war crimes seemed inadequate.

We wondered if law could ever be an alternative to war. Was there a case that could or should be made for just law being justly enforced? Might our response to military intervention have been different if the Kosovo action had been lawful? What if NATO had instead received UN approval? What about Rwanda, where the world community mostly stood on the sidelines and watched genocide unfold? Would we ever support the use of coercive power to protect human life? And what about the first Gulf War in 1991, which was sanctioned by the UN? The ride home passed quickly as we pondered questions for which we all had opinions but no answers.

What emerged from our bus conversation was a sense that as people connected with Anabaptist churches, we were unclear about how we view law, order, or the state as an instrument to protect human rights. To challenge us to be more thoughtful about considering options to protect human life in situations of massive rights violations, representatives from MCC–Ontario and the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Conrad Grebel University College agreed to listen to those within our community who were actively

engaged in law enforcement that had at its core mediating conflicts through law.

Conversations with Professionals and Scholars

What can we learn from these persons about the relationship of peace to law and our Anabaptist faith? we wondered. Not presupposing the outcome, we stepped out in faith that our brothers and sisters engaged in law enforcement might assist the peace church contemplate the intersection of peace theology, law, and coercion. Conversations with three distinct groups of professionals (lawyers, police officers, and accountants) who use law on a daily basis and who identified with a historic peace church were originally envisioned to help shed light on this theologically complex relationship.

While the reason for selecting the first two professions was pretty obvious, naming accountants as a profession engaged in promoting peace through law usually generated a chuckle. However, we believed that accountants were representative of many other professions (human resource managers, social workers, probation officers, et al.) that enforce law on a regular basis but are not recognized for such a role. Unfortunately, we were never able to organize accountants or their proxies for a discussion of how they enforce law in a manner consistent with their faith.

Police officers and lawyers who were invited to participate in this conversation responded enthusiastically. We held a series of engaging and energizing informal planning meetings with small groups of each profession. These discussions culminated in two larger, more structured formal discussions with each group. The formal meetings initially involved an “inner circle” (including only representatives from the profession) and an “outer circle” of academics, religious scholars, and a few others. Typically, the inner circle would be given the first chance to discuss a question identified by a planning group as significant, and then the question was discussed between the two circles.

The point of these conversations was not to gather material that could be published, demonstrate how wrong-headed some position was, or win a debate. Rather, it was to listen in order to understand. We were able to foster an open, honest conversation where no participants felt compelled to look over their shoulder and cover themselves. As I recall, some extraordinarily

soul-searching comments were made by participants about their own profession. A safe environment allowed us to do this.

Highlights and Future Prospects

No formal articulation of conclusions was ever written. The most thought-provoking memories I have of these listening sessions are the following:

- Controversy was embedded in the earliest discussions. Not everyone thought it was a good idea, or appropriate, for the legal or policing professions to be seen as driving a discussion about how law and enforcement intersected with peace theology.
- The original motive for these discussions, i.e., to gain a better understanding of how to respond to future Rwanda or Kosovo-like situations of massive human rights violations, was seldom mentioned and never significantly discussed. Our gatherings primarily focused on talking about law and faith as they related to each occupation.
- Despite stated Mennonite claims of being an open, welcoming community for diverse perspectives, we encountered stories of much heartache (mostly concerning police officers who did not participate in our discussions) where officers had felt unwelcome or were even excluded from Anabaptist congregations because of their occupation.
- Most officers expressed their reason for being in their profession in language that was as much a language of “calling” as I have heard from religious workers.
- Lawyers were clearly aware that a key goal of their profession in resolving conflict was to “bend the other to their will.”
- The practice of law has important shortcomings, but it provides a means to order society and resolve conflicts imperfectly that does not require direct violence. Coercion,

however, is always a possibility in enforcing a legal judgment.

- Police officers almost always described their primary weapon as the pencil (for writing reports, notes, and tickets), while the outer circle seemed focused on the gun.

These conversations with police and lawyers continued over about two years and then just faded away. No decision was explicitly made that they were over. Other priorities and the normal busyness of life edged out further gatherings. Then, the article by Andy Alexis-Baker in the Spring 2007 CGR, “The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police,” served as a catalyst to advance the conversation. MCC Ontario and PACS therefore proposed to CGR that the journal dedicate an entire issue to responses to that article by police or lawyer participants, or further elaboration by others who could add an important new dimension. We make no claim that this issue is the end of the story or that it is the complete story. We believe, however, that it adds some voices to an important conversation that we hope will continue.

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