

# Humility, Peacebuilding, and the Limits of Christian Pacifism

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In early May 2016, the Reverend Qashisha Ephraim Ashur Alkhas, a priest in the Diocese of California of the Assyrian Church of the East, presented what he described as a story of interfaith peacebuilding to the National Council of Churches' annual Christian Unity Gathering. The story came from a village in Iraq's Ninewa (Nineveh) Plains. The Assyrian Church of the East, historically centered in what is now northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran, boasts a long and rich history, tracing its origins to the first century CE and the missionary efforts of Saint Thomas the Apostle. Today, however, the Assyrian Church of the East, like other church communions in the region, confronts a serious threat to its continued existence in its native homeland, as Christians, Yazidis, and other minority religious groups face what they describe as genocide carried out by forces of the Islamic State group and other Islamist militias. "War came to them, genocide came to them," lamented Alkhas.<sup>1</sup>

Yet amidst this bleak reality, Alkhas identified hopeful signs of Christian-Muslim partnership. The interfaith collaboration that he highlighted as a sign of hope was born on the battlefield. As Islamic State militants advanced upon an Assyrian Christian village in northern Iraq this past year, they were met by the combined forces of three Assyrian Christian militias, militias formed by Assyrian Christians on the frontlines of the Islamic State's advances who seek to recapture and defend their native villages. Although outnumbered, the Assyrian Christian fighters nevertheless managed to hold off the Islamic State forces for hours, which was long enough for Kurdish Peshmerga reinforcements to arrive and secure the village's defense. For Alkhas, this war-zone collaboration between

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Reverend Alkhas come from notes I took while attending the National Council of Churches' Christian Unity Gathering, May 5-6, 2016 in Baltimore, Maryland as a representative of Mennonite Church USA.

mostly Sunni Muslim soldiers of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Assyrian Christian fighters offers a hopeful story of what he described as interfaith peacebuilding. Christians in the United States, he urged, should not “be prejudicial about the circumstances Assyrian Christians find themselves in,” but should instead lift up in prayer their Assyrian sisters and brothers in Christ as they seek to defend their lives and their homeland from genocidal forces.

How can pacifist Mennonites—and other Christian proponents of “pacifism” or “nonviolence”—receive this story from Reverend Alkhas without their first reaction being the construction of pacifist rejoinders to the story, whether condemnations of the Assyrian Christian actions as embodying a neo-Constantinian or neo-neo-Constantinian betrayal of the gospel, or hurried efforts to insist on the imagined efficacy of some nonviolent response to the Islamic State’s assaults on Assyrian Christian, Yazidi, and Kurdish villages?<sup>2</sup> Put another way: Can pacifist Mennonites, and pacifist Christians more broadly, have the humility to receive this story in silence, fear, and trembling? Can pacifist Christians avoid glibly pretending to have clear, nonviolent alternatives to offer Assyrian Christian fighters defending their communities, accepting the limits to pacifism to offer solutions to the world?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder differentiated among various types of “Constantinianism,” which for him named the church’s perennial temptation to abandon its identity as a nonconformed community by conflating its identity with some supposedly broader, more universal, community. See Yoder, “The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 135–47. One way to frame my paper’s argument is this: rejecting the Constantinian temptation will sometimes require silence from Christian pacifists, the relinquishing of the pretense of having nonviolent solutions to all situations.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I use *pacifism* to refer to the position that it is always, in all circumstances, wrong to kill. Unlike the traditional *nonresistant* stance of Anabaptist communities in North America, *pacifism* includes an active search for and promotion of nonviolent alternatives to war and other violent measures. Historians have traced the shift within “mainstream” Anabaptist circles in North America from nonresistance to pacifism and nonviolence. See Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998); Ervin Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011); and Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994). The organization for which I work,

To call for a humble recognition of the limits of Christian pacifism at this point in Mennonite history may well seem out of place. Anabaptist peacebuilding has grown and matured to the point that Conrad Grebel University College could hold a truly global conference on Mennonite peacebuilding in June 2016. Viewed from one angle, Christian pacifism is enjoying a moment of ascendancy, with Catholic theologians gathering at the Vatican to deliberate as to whether the church's just war doctrine should be rescinded.<sup>4</sup> Is this not a moment for Christian pacifist triumphalism, a proud embrace of the movement from nonresistant quietism to activism, and the confident espousal of nonviolent alternatives to war and of nonviolent responses to injustice?

My thesis is a basic one—perhaps too basic. Specifically, I want to sound a note of caution amidst any celebrations of Mennonite peacebuilding about the pitfalls of Christian pacifist triumphalism—and with it make a plea for a measure of humility regarding the power of nonviolent alternatives to war.<sup>5</sup> I say that this thesis may be too basic, because I grant that perhaps my worries about a triumphalist Christian pacifism are simply misplaced, and that my note of caution is an uninteresting repetition of commonly held assumptions.

Speaking confessionally, however, I know that I, at least, am prone to a triumphalist Christian pacifism, and I imagine that I am not alone in

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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), has embodied and reflected this shift. In addition to “meeting basic human needs in the name of Christ,” MCC supports partners around the world in promoting nonviolent alternatives to violent conflict and in building peace. My warnings of Christian pacifist triumphalism should not be interpreted as a critique of such efforts: I am a strong proponent of MCC's multifaceted peace witness. Yet, perhaps ironically, it has been through my active involvement in MCC's peacebuilding efforts that I have become convinced of Christian pacifism's limits.

<sup>4</sup> See “An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence,” statement from the conference Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence held in Rome, April 11-13, 2016: [www.paxchristi.net/sites/default/files/documentsappeal-to-catholic-church-to-recommit-to-nonviolence.pdf](http://www.paxchristi.net/sites/default/files/documentsappeal-to-catholic-church-to-recommit-to-nonviolence.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> I write here as a Christian pacifist to other Christian pacifists, arguing for a measure of humility about the limits of Christian pacifism to offer nonviolent alternatives to war. While I suspect that non-Christian pacifists—Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, secular, or other—may have similarly strong reasons for such humility, I do not presume that they face the same triumphalist temptation.

this. When Reverend Alkhas shared his story of interfaith peacebuilding, my instinctive reaction was to begin internally crafting a pacifist rejoinder to his valorization of Assyrian Christian fighters defending their homes. Then I caught myself. Why did I feel the need to contest his story, if only in my head? Why didn't I simply receive the story in silence?

As I have thought more about my initial reaction to Alkhas's story, I have reflected on my years of working with Mennonite Central Committee in Palestine and Israel. Specifically, I have found myself ruminating on how I would regularly encounter well-meaning visitors from Canada, the United States, and Europe whose words exhibited what I came to think of as a form of peace colonialism. Such short-term visitors routinely raised variations on the same questions: "Why haven't Palestinians tried nonviolence?" or "Where is the Palestinian Gandhi?" Such questions, it seemed to me, reflected an unwillingness or lack of readiness on the part of those asking the questions to immerse themselves in Palestinians' lives, to listen to and learn from Palestinians about their complex struggles.

These questions also betrayed an ignorance of the many forms of Palestinian nonviolent resistance against Israeli colonization over the past decades.<sup>6</sup> Such is the faith in the power of nonviolence among some of its proponents that the Palestinian failure to stem the unrelenting movement of Israeli colonization is taken as proof that nonviolence must not have been tried or that nonviolent efforts were flawed in some way. What cannot be countenanced is that there might not be clear, efficacious nonviolent responses to some situations. My answer, when faced by questions from privileged, white, North American Mennonites asking why Palestinians had not tried nonviolence was a politely couched version of: "Let's be silent for now and listen to the Palestinians you'll be meeting during your short time here." Yet, as I reflected on my initial reaction to Alkhas's story, I recognized a similar dynamic at play within myself, a need to articulate a nonviolent response to the grim realities the speaker described and an unwillingness

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby, *Popular Protest in Palestine: The History and Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014); and Mary Elizabeth King, *A Quiet Revolution: The First Palestinian Intifada and Nonviolent Resistance* (New York: Nation Books, 2007).

simply to sit and listen.

Back to my thesis, this time stated more robustly: Humility about the limits of Christian pacifism means there will be some situations to which the proper Christian response is silence—not silence as mute indifference, but the silence of mourning and lament, silence as a wordless cry to God in the face of injustice, oppression, and the rule of death and destruction from which no obvious escape can be found.

Stating the thesis like this makes me anxious that this plea for a humble recognition of Christian pacifism's limits will be misunderstood. Thus I hasten to identify what this call for humility is *not*. I hesitated, for example, about starting these reflections with Alkhas's story for fear that, with its reference to genocide against Christians in Iraq and Syria, it would be misread as an implicit call for or endorsement of military action by US, Canadian, or European forces to stem the genocide. Indeed, within neo-conservative circles, urgent calls to stop the genocide of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria go hand-in-hand with arguments for increased US military intervention. Yet this linkage is neither necessary nor inevitable. One can rightly raise concerns about armed humanitarian intervention masking neo-colonial interests. One can recognize what is happening to Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria as genocide while also joining critics like Andrew Bacevich and David Rieff, who express skepticism about the limits of US power, scathingly expose the horrific global damage wrought by the purportedly idealistic deployment of US military force, and argue against further US military interventionism, whether of the George W. Bush-Dick Cheney "bringing democracy to the Middle East" type or the Samantha Power/Anne-Marie Slaughter "responsibility to protect" variety.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Few Mennonite pacifists have sympathy for pleas for armed intervention aiming to "bring democracy to the Middle East." Yet Mennonite theologians and peacebuilders have grappled with how to respond to or engage Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Will to Intervene (W2I) foreign policy doctrines that emerged in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. A crystallizing moment in Mennonite pacifist engagement with broader conversations about self-proclaimed humanitarian armed interventions came during the Somalia crisis of the early 1990s. See J.R. Burkholder and Ted Koontz, "Keeping our Calling Clear: When Armed Force Is Used to Make Relief Work Possible," *Gospel Herald*, January 12, 1993, 6-7; J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Dark Side of Responsible Love," *Gospel Herald*, March 16, 1993, 6-7; J. Denny Weaver, "We Must

A silence borne out of a recognition that Christians may have no clear, efficacious nonviolent answers to particular situations is thus not the same as a loquacious confidence in the efficacy of war or other violent responses. Any critiques of Christian pacifism that chastise it for epistemological hubris, or for excessive confidence in the power of nonviolence to achieve particular outcomes, rebound more strongly on proponents of war and other violent responses, for they most certainly exhibit an excessive confidence and unwarranted optimism in US interventionism. Silence in the face of Christian pacifism's limits in offering nonviolent alternatives to all instances of injustice, oppression, and war thus need not entail the embrace, or even the tacit endorsement, of war.

Recognizing the limits of nonviolent action is also not a restatement in a different register of Niebuhrian realism. To acknowledge that Christian pacifists will sometimes not have nonviolent options to offer is not equivalent to arguing for or endorsing the use of violent force as part of the supposed burden of responsible action in the world. Similarly, an acknowledgment of Christian pacifism's limits need not lead to a retreat into quietism. To accept those limits is not to criticize the myriad ways that Mennonites have become actively engaged in building peace and transforming conflict. From pioneering work in restorative justice to nonviolent direct action, from diplomatic initiatives along various tracks to integrating conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding approaches into disaster response and sustainable development work, such peacebuilding efforts are well and good. They are rightly celebrated and should be expanded. Yet justifiable activism in working for peaceful transformation of violent conflict should not lure one into thinking there will always be nonviolent options at hand. Some

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Continue to Reject Just War Thinking," *Gospel Herald*, April 27, 1993, 6-8. I have previously drawn on the work of David Rieff and Andrew Bacevich in raising skeptical questions about any Christian pacifist endorsement of R2P and W2I: this essay extends that critical reflection. See Alain Epp Weaver and Peter Dula, "MCC, Humanitarianism, and Intervention," *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 13 (2005): 68-81, and Alain Epp Weaver, "On Not Being Ashamed of the Margins," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 42, no. 1 (January-March 2012): 10-12. See also Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2008) and David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

situations will bring Christian pacifists up short, and when that happens, silence will be preferable to the arrogant pretense of having solutions to offer.

To acknowledge the limits of Christian pacifism, to humbly recognize that efficacious nonviolent responses to violent conflict are not always evident, has multiple benefits. First, such an acknowledgment helps Christian pacifists to avoid constructing triumphalist narratives of past nonviolent struggles. This in turn helps them to avoid whitewashing history, recognizing the past in all its rich complexity. Returning to my time in Palestine, I note that the same people who would ask why Palestinians had not tried nonviolence typically pointed to the civil rights struggle in the US as an example of successful nonviolent action. To be sure, there is a rich history of nonviolent struggle to learn from and celebrate in the civil rights movement. Yet in a triumphalist Christian pacifism, this history can become flattened, obscuring the multifaceted struggle by African Americans against white supremacy. Recent historical studies have sought to restore complexity to the history of the civil rights struggle by exploring the role played by weapons in resistance to the reign of whiteness.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging such complex histories should not detract from the rich history of nonviolent action from which to learn.<sup>9</sup> Rather, such acknowledgment stands as a warning against overly simplified historical narratives that erase from view how armed and unarmed resistance are often intertwined, and that overpromise what nonviolence can deliver.

A second benefit of recognizing the limits of Christian pacifism is that, for those of us of European descent, it can decenter us, reminding us that we are not at the center of God's reconciling work in the world. Such decentering can help us avoid the dangers of peace colonialism. I have previously explored such decentering within the historical development of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT).<sup>10</sup> CPT started out with a vision of

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<sup>8</sup> See Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Akinyele Umowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2014); and Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See Erica Chenoweth, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Alain Epp Weaver, "Getting in the Way' or 'Being-With': Missiologies in Tension in the Work of Christian Peacemaker Teams," *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 19 (2011): 260-77.

Christian pacifists “getting in the way” by interposing themselves between warring parties. Yet, I argued, this missiological model of “getting in the way,” often presented in the Pauline language of the battle against principalities and powers, has been in tension within CPT with the missiological model of “being-with,” a model of prayer, fasting, and lamentation in solidarity with people pressed but not crushed by oppression and injustice. In the “getting in the way” model, missional agency is located primarily in the self-sacrificial (even heroic) activity of CPTers, while the “being-with” model reflects a concern about the limits of nonviolent direct action and positively values the ‘being-with’ of accompaniment. In this alternative model, the missional agency shifts from CPTers towards God’s Spirit at work in the world, including in the people among whom CPTers live. More recently, CPT has moved to leave behind the “getting in the way” model. This move not only dovetails with a recognition of the limits of Christian pacifism but also represents the fruit of ongoing conversations about how to avoid peace colonialism.

I have gestured in these reflections towards a certain form of silence—a silence of mourning and lament. I will conclude, however, with a story of Christian speech in Iraqi Kurdistan that drives me back to silence. A reporter for SAT-7—a Christian, Arabic-language, satellite television station—was interviewing Christian refugees in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan who had been forcibly displaced from Qaraqosh in the Ninewa Plains. One refugee interviewed was Myriam, a ten-year-old girl, who had been driven from her home along with her family by Islamic State fighters. Asked by the reporter what her feelings were towards the people who had made her a refugee, she responded, “I won’t do anything to them; I will only ask God to forgive them.” Myriam’s response went viral across the Middle East, viewed on YouTube over a million times.<sup>11</sup>

Here we have speech, not silence—the speech of forgiveness. But these words of forgiveness drive me back to silence, a silence of prayer in fear and trembling; a prayer of gratitude for the terrifying beauty of divine grace that breaks in through Myriam’s witness; a prayer of confession that I fear I would not respond as Myriam did if my family faced what hers has; a prayer of lament that I as a Christian pacifist have limited, fractured ideas at best about how to halt the violent conflict that has left her and her family as refugees.

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.sat7usa.org/child-forgives-isis](http://www.sat7usa.org/child-forgives-isis).



Are Christian pacifists left, then, in the silence of mute indifference? Most definitely not. But Christian pacifists would do well, I suggest, to recognize that in some situations they will have no clear peacebuilding options to advance, no obvious nonviolent alternatives to offer—and that recognition can and should drive them to prayerful silence.

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