

## Is God a Pacifist? The A. James Reimer and J. Denny Weaver Debate in Contemporary Mennonite Peace Theology

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God's means of achieving the ultimate reconciliation of all things are not immediately evident to us. God cannot be subjected to our interpretation of the non-violent way of Jesus. Our commitment to the way of the cross (reconciliation) is not premised on God's pacifism or non-pacifism. It is precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.—A. James Reimer<sup>1</sup>

[O]ne of the longest-running distortions in Christian theology has been the attribution of violence and violent intent to the will and activity of God. But if God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus rejected violence, as is almost universally believed, then the God revealed in Jesus Christ should be pictured in nonviolent images. If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.—J. Denny Weaver<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s a somewhat heated debate erupted on the pages of *The Conrad Grebel Review* between Canadian Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer and his American colleague J. Denny Weaver. Reimer accused Weaver of “ethical reductionism,” while Weaver accused Reimer of “buying into a mainstream Constantinian theology which spells the end of the Mennonite peace witness.” At one point Weaver suggested that the two of them co-

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<sup>1</sup> A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 492.

<sup>2</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 5.

author a book outlining their opposing visions for the future of Mennonite peace theology; they could entitle it *Mennonite Theology at the Crossroads*. But Reimer disagreed with Weaver's notion that the two of them in fact held radically opposing viewpoints. With the two theologians unable to agree even on the nature of their disagreement, the project was abandoned.<sup>3</sup>

Given that Mennonite scholars have ventured out of the realm of biblical theology and ethics and into systematic theology only within the past several decades,<sup>4</sup> the deep-seated nature of the disagreement between Reimer and Weaver is perhaps understandable. This is new territory for Mennonites, after all. Among other things, this significant shift has brought with it a novel set of questions regarding the implications of nonviolent ethics for understanding how God acts in human history. The resultant ongoing debate among Mennonite scholars can be summed up in the provocative question "Is God a pacifist?," which garners a variety of responses, some negative and others affirmative.<sup>5</sup> Within these larger debates, Reimer and Weaver represent two major perspectives. Following feminist and womanist theologians who view God as nonviolent, Weaver stresses the biblical narratives of Jesus, on the Yoderian grounds that the creeds of the "Constantinian" era (the formulations of Nicaea-Chalcedon) distorted Christian self-understanding through erasing the nonviolent, ethical dimension of faith in order to accommodate the violence of Christendom.<sup>6</sup> Contrastingly, Reimer views the "classical theological orthodoxy" of the

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<sup>3</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 247-48. The two theologians expound upon these accusations as they address one another in their subsequent work, whether explicitly or implicitly.

<sup>4</sup> J. Denny Weaver, "The General versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th-Century Mennonite Theologizing," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 28-29. See also J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000), 17.

<sup>5</sup> See proceedings from the Mennonite symposium, "Is God Nonviolent?," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 1-55; proceedings from a forum responding to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1-49; and proceedings from the Mennonite symposium on "Judgment and the Wrath of God" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 44-101.

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, "General versus the Particular," 45-46; J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 208, 194, 204; and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 11.

creeds as the crucial foundation for a nonviolent ethic, as they ensure that no human political or ethical system is absolutized, including nonviolence. “God is no Mennonite pacifist,” he asserts.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows I will contend that although Weaver’s nonviolent understanding of God and redemption begins the move toward a more consistently nonviolent peace ethic, Reimer’s critique provides important correctives concerning divine otherness and the limits of human nonviolence. From my feminist-Mennonite perspective, however, Weaver’s recognition of God’s nonviolence, as revealed in Jesus Christ, does not impinge upon divine “otherness” as Reimer and others fear, but redefines and radicalizes it as paradoxically particular, immanent, and participatory. It is not peace but the cycles of violence and retribution that constrain God and human ethics, the latter being images, albeit imperfect ones, of God’s peaceable character and action in human history. I will first outline the different theological contexts and conversations into which Reimer and Weaver speak and then focus on their debate surrounding the Trinity, particularly within the atonement, and the relationship between Christian nonviolent ethics and the work of God in history.

### **Which Root of the Matter? On Contexts and Starting Points**

Recognizing that Mennonites variously self-identify as “both Catholic and Protestant” and “neither Catholic nor Protestant,”<sup>8</sup> alongside Weaver’s observation that only fairly recently have Mennonites “started to become comfortable talking about theology as theology,” it is not surprising that identifying a starting point for Mennonite systematic theological reflection is less than straightforward. It is not clear where Mennonite theology fits within this larger Christian conversation. This explains in part why Weaver and Reimer enter it at such different places.

In Weaver’s view most 20th-century Mennonite theology has rested on the assumption that Mennonites accepted a universal “theology-in-general or Christianity-as-such,” composed of orthodox doctrines/

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<sup>7</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 247-48, 492.

<sup>8</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 27. According to Reimer, Weaver sees Mennonites as neither Catholic nor Protestant. See Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 256.

definitions of the Trinity and Christology and substitutionary interpretations of the atonement, and simply augmented this “core” with their distinctive emphases on nonviolent ethics and discipleship.<sup>9</sup> However, Weaver reverses this approach, beginning instead with the distinctives of Mennonite peace theology. He suggests that for Mennonites, Jesus’ nonviolence is a key part of the core; it is not necessary for Mennonite theology to assert its “validity” on the basis of the priorities of other, majority Christian traditions which sideline peace from the start.

Resisting the urge to defer to the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which he views as ethically vacuous, Weaver turns to the New Testament narratives as a more truly ecumenical starting point, and one that lends specific content to Jesus’ life and ministry and thereby illustrates the particularity of God’s (nonviolent) character. In this way Weaver safeguards the distinctive contribution that Mennonite theology makes to wider Christianity, arguing that it can take its place among other Christian theologies because they too are particular, distinctive, or contextual.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, he turns to a rereading of Christian history that maintains an ethic of peace or nonviolence as the ultimate measure of the faithfulness of the church; hence his siding with John Howard Yoder’s negative evaluation of the church of Christendom or of the Constantinian era, his view that the creeds are irreparably tainted by the alliance of church and empire at the time of their formulation, and his disapproval of attempts to “salvage Christendom’s violence-accommodating theology.”<sup>11</sup>

For Weaver, the presumably orthodox creeds are contextual and therefore contestable on the grounds of a nonviolent ethic. His emphasis both is influenced by, and influences, his engagement with other contextual theologies critical of violence—namely feminist, womanist, and black liberation theologies.<sup>12</sup> He engages “cutting edge” contextual

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<sup>9</sup> Weaver, “General versus the Particular,” 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 43-44; Weaver, “Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology,” 191, 207-209, and Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 3-7, 113-18.

<sup>11</sup> Weaver, “General versus the Particular,” 45, and Weaver, “Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology,” 208.

<sup>12</sup> Malinda E. Berry calls these “other voices on the peripheries of theology in general” or other “marginal voices.” See Berry, “Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny*

(or liberative) theologians such as Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, Delores Williams, and James Cone, taking into account their attention to systemic forms of violence such as sexism, racism, and classism. He uses these contextual theologies as resources for a more thoroughly nonviolent Mennonite theology, with a particular focus on Christology, atonement or soteriology, and a theology (proper) of God as nonviolent.<sup>13</sup>

Despite drawing deeply from Yoder's notion of the "Constantinian shift" as well as building on Yoder's Christology, Weaver admits that in using nonviolence to critique traditional atonement theories and orthodox, creedal theology, he has "chosen to engage in a theological task eschewed by Yoder."<sup>14</sup> Following black, feminist, and womanist theologians, Weaver ventures into novel theological territory, radically reframing Christology and letting go of what is harmful in the Christian tradition, while appealing to the Bible, Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, and Girardian thinkers as resources for nonviolent reflection and ethics, including his own nonviolent reinterpretation of the atonement, termed "narrative Christus Victor."<sup>15</sup>

Reimer's view sharply contrasts with Weaver's in evaluating the significance of the doctrines and creedal statements of Nicaea-Chalcedon. Though Reimer agrees with Weaver on their lack of ethical content, he nevertheless sees them as necessary, faithful distillations of the diversity of biblical concepts of and assertions about God, and therefore as foundational for Mennonite nonviolence.<sup>16</sup> Reading the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition

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Weaver, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 263.

<sup>13</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 1, 5-7, 323. Weaver prioritizes Mennonite distinctiveness even in relation to feminist, womanist, and black theologies, using them as resources but not creating a theological hybrid.

<sup>14</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 7, 161-78, and Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 4, 221 n3. See also Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 24. Despite being attuned to feminist/womanist concerns, Weaver does not apply these critiques to Yoder or even mention the difficulties raised by Yoder's abusive behavior toward women.

<sup>15</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 125, 287-88, 1-2, 320; Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," 204; and J. Denny Weaver, "Response to Reflections on *The Nonviolent Atonement*," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 48. Some of his key influences are Yoder, Harold S. Bender, René Girard, and Walter Wink.

<sup>16</sup> Weaver, "General versus the Particular," 40-41; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 261, 269. In Weaver's terms, Reimer "contends that the trinitarian orthodoxy of Nicaea is

as a theologically orthodox, trinitarian tradition with a distinctively “heightened ethical fidelity to the Jesus narrative,” the starting point for Reimer is “classical theological orthodoxy” as the “metaphysical-theological” foundation for a Mennonite peace ethic. “It is the Christian doctrine of God that is the foundation for good ethics,” says Reimer, “not good ethics which is the norm for our view of God.”<sup>17</sup> He argues that to begin with nonviolence, as Weaver does, is to buy into the “human history-making arrogance” of modern liberalism, to project one’s own (human or, in the case of Mennonites, “ethnic”) ideology onto God instead of viewing God as beyond every ideology.

Reimer contends that what is needed is a radically transcendent, orthodox understanding of God—which he finds especially in the tradition of apophatic or negative theology (“God as *limit*, as *unmasker*, as absolute *boundary*, as standing *over-against* the ideologies of any given age”).<sup>18</sup> Underlying Reimer’s claim is his disagreement with Weaver’s and Yoder’s characterization of all Constantinian-era theology as irretrievably tainted by violence. Trinitarian orthodoxy “cannot be equated with Constantinianism, but is in fact the best theological defence against all Constantinian-type political theologies (whether of the left, right, or centre).”<sup>19</sup> Reimer notes also that Weaver, more than Yoder, overlooks the fact that Arianism was “much more congenial to Constantinianism than orthodoxy,” meaning that its defeat actually served to rein in more extreme Constantinian impulses. Thus, Reimer “cannot dismiss the working of the divine in the movements of history even in its most unlikely places and persons (like Constantine).”<sup>20</sup>

Reimer’s suspicion about the assumptions of modern liberalism is greatly influenced by both Canadian philosopher George Grant (1918-88) and Stanley Hauerwas. Part of Reimer’s project is to caution Mennonites against capitulating too easily to modern liberal notions of “anti-sacramentalism,” voluntarism, and historicism, which he claims are both inconsistent with early Anabaptism and have led to contemporary atrocities such as nuclear

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necessary to anchor ‘the moral claims of Jesus’ in the ‘very nature and person of God.’”

<sup>17</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 248-49, 261.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 32, 34; emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-49. See also A. James Reimer, “The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 53.

<sup>20</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 270, 295.

war and the decimation of the environment.<sup>21</sup> On these grounds Reimer, a “self-critical Mennonite,” turns to classical orthodoxy or to a Barthian, neo-orthodox sense of God as radically transcendent or wholly ‘other,’ which he sees as the surest way to avoid absolutizing any human political or ethical system (a move amounting, in his view, to a heretical narrowing of God’s trinitarian person, historical action, and allegiances).<sup>22</sup> Despite not identifying as Yoderian—Yoder once accused him of “trying to Catholicize the Mennonites”—Reimer nevertheless claims to be fleshing out certain neglected trajectories in Yoder’s and early Anabaptist thought regarding the “*positive* role of civil institutions outside the church.”<sup>23</sup> This leads him to recognize the tragic limits of nonviolence and the ambiguity surrounding ethical choices, a position bearing clear evidence of Niebuhrian Christian realism.<sup>24</sup>

In one sense, the divergences in Weaver’s and Reimer’s theologies can be traced to their different national contexts. Weaver notes that the hegemony of “civil religion” which threatens American Mennonites is virtually absent in the multicultural Canadian context. Though American Mennonites stress their distinctiveness to the point of militancy as a reaction against the cultural “melting pot,” in Weaver’s view the Canadian multicultural “mosaic” poses an equally serious threat of Mennonite complacency with regard to maintaining a distinctive religious identity.<sup>25</sup> But the debate is clearly not reducible to nationalities alone. Their interpretations of Yoder also comprise a key difference between their views. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner contend that Reimer views Yoder’s peace theology as “too idealistic” and that Weaver sets out to defend Yoder by depicting peace as “the tail that wags the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21-22, 271; Reimer, “Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology,” 33-34; A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 30, 34, 257.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 291, and *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 1-3; emphasis in original. Paul G. Doerksen calls Reimer’s project “a more orthodox version of Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus*.” See Doerksen, “Introduction,” in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, xiv.

<sup>24</sup> A. James Reimer, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church’s Teachings and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 173, 131; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 276-79. This places Reimer closer to Mennonite theologian J. Lawrence Burkholder than to Yoder.

<sup>25</sup> Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 34, 38-39.

theological dog.”<sup>26</sup> But such a distinction is only a partial truth; as we have seen, Weaver is not straightforwardly Yoderian, nor is Reimer essentially anti-Yoderian.

Instead, I contend that the two thinkers define the Anabaptist core differently, which both influences and is influenced by the significantly different wider theological conversations they join. Although both set out to revise Anabaptist-Mennonite theology for the present context, they disagree about what this theology stands in need of, or what would render it more systematic or consistent. Weaver’s emphases on peace ethics and social justice lead him to liberative theologies and liberation methodologies that begin with praxis and use it as a measure for theological reflection (revealing vestiges of violence in Mennonite theology, Christology, and soteriology), whereas Reimer, stressing theological orthodoxy, finds the Mennonite tendency toward orthopraxy to be theologically thin—i.e., lacking a more robust theological foundation as the measure for ethics. As will become clear below, these distinct starting points significantly affect how the two theologians view peace or nonviolence. Reimer arguably sees peace as primarily the avoidance of violence (hence his concern with its limiting God); Weaver sees it as an active ethic of peacemaking, a view that I find more compelling. With these contextual and methodological differences in mind, I now turn to Reimer’s and Weaver’s debate concerning God, nonviolence, and the cross.

### **Who Was Crucified? Trinity, Atonement, and God’s “Otherness”**

As implied above, Weaver’s case for God’s nonviolence is based both on the Mennonite tradition of Christocentric, biblical peace/nonviolence and on feminist and womanist denunciations of traditional interpretations of the atonement as depictions of “divine child abuse” that encourage women and others to submit passively to abuse and oppression (on the assumption that all forms of suffering are equally and inherently redemptive). In holding together these twin critiques of violence, Weaver concludes that there is greater fluidity between Jesus Christ and God the Creator or “Father”

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner, “Introduction,” in *The New Yoder*, ed. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), xi n3, xii.



than has been emphasized in traditional atonement theories.<sup>27</sup> “The classic orthodox formulation of the Trinity emphasizes that each person of the Trinity participates in all of the attributes of God,” he says. Thus, he adds, “Jesus as the revelation of God reveals the very character and being of God.”<sup>28</sup> This “high Christology” leads Weaver to follow feminist and womanist theologians in critiquing atonement theories that depict God as either causing or requiring Jesus’ suffering and death for the sake of salvation, especially the 11th-century substitutionary-satisfaction model developed by Anselm of Canterbury, which emphasizes God’s need for the violent “justice” of the cross to restore God’s honor, and, to a lesser extent, the moral influence model developed by Anselm’s near-contemporary, Peter Abelard, which emphasizes the cross as an exemplary act of self-sacrifice or self-destructive “love.”<sup>29</sup> In Weaver’s words:

[I]f Jesus rejected the sword and his actions portrayed the nonviolent confrontation of evil in making the reign of God visible, then it ought not to be thinkable that the God who is revealed in Jesus would orchestrate the death of Jesus in a scheme that assumed doing justice meant the violence of punishment, or a scheme in which a divinely sanctioned death paid a debt to restore God’s honor. If Jesus truly reveals God the Father, then it would be a contradiction for Jesus to be nonviolent and for God to bring about salvation through divinely orchestrated violence. . . .<sup>30</sup>

In order to avoid the pitfalls of both Anselm’s and Abelard’s atonement theories— notions of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering, respectively, which many feminists and womanists find deeply problematic—Weaver offers “narrative Christus Victor,” a variation on the classic, patristic-era Christus Victor theory but with novel emphases. He presents the atonement as God’s nonviolent victory over the powers of sin, death, and violence in a theory stressing the life, death, and resurrection narratives of Jesus Christ as exemplary narratives of divine nonviolent

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<sup>27</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 5-8, 224.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 166, 91-92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

resistance.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Weaver's appeal to an orthodox view of the Trinity, Reimer vehemently disagrees with him, arguing that Weaver essentially presents "Jesusology," collapsing the Trinity into its second person.<sup>32</sup> In Reimer's view the Trinity encompasses "diversity within unity," three distinct persons who nevertheless cooperate:

(1) God the Father represents the unbegotten and mysterious origin of all things, the one who has power over life and death, and can in his hidden way turn violence (which in itself is evil) into good, and thereby bring about the providential divine purpose; (2) God the Son or Word as incarnated in Jesus the Christ reveals the mystery of redemption through nonviolent love and the cross, the reconciliation of God and humanity, and embodies the standard for all Christian ethics; and (3) the Holy Spirit as the great reconciler and sanctifier who is the mysterious source of life, power, and reconciliation of all things separated by sin and the fall.<sup>33</sup>

Against the Mennonite tendency to use the Sermon on the Mount as the sole measure for ethics, which leads to Weaver's alleged reduction of God to Jesus, Reimer proposes his "theocentric Christology" as an alternative basis for a theologically sound peace ethic. At stake for Reimer is the mysterious otherness of God as reflected in classical or orthodox theology, God's ability to judge evil and bring meaning out of violence and suffering, and the diversity of images of God portrayed in the Bible, some violent and some nonviolent.<sup>34</sup> With regard to the cross, Reimer is likewise uncomfortable with reducing the atonement to a single theory, as Weaver does, arguing that all three traditional theories "have biblical support," and countering the accusation of "divine child abuse" by appealing to Trinitarian

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 114, 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 272.

<sup>33</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 34. See also 171-73 and *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 287.

<sup>34</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 273, 491, 280-81, and A. James Reimer, *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 21, 39.

intimacy, such that the cross signifies the death of Godself rather than the death of the Son at the hands of the Father.<sup>35</sup> Thus, for Reimer, “God cannot be said to be nonresistant and pacifist in any strict, univocal sense.”<sup>36</sup>

Many of Reimer’s concerns are shared by other Mennonite theologians, particularly the concern to preserve God’s absolute otherness by not imposing nonviolent ethics on God.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, J. Alexander Sider contends that both Weaver and Reimer attempt to “domesticate” God or to render God “a stable referent for our speech,” since both limit God to either nonviolence or violence alone. Sider posits that Reimer, in particular, misuses apophatic or negative theology, which is not simply the “denial of positive claims about God” but comprises part of the paradoxical/metaphorical quality of theological language (which must *both* assert *and* deny every concept used for God). Thus, as framed by Sider, both Weaver’s assertion of God’s pacifism and Reimer’s denial thereof constitute attempts to hem God in and, incidentally, fall under Reimer’s definition of heresy as reduction, narrowing, or “the part wanting to be the whole.”<sup>38</sup>

But Sider is also more cognizant than Reimer of the particularity and immanence of God’s otherness, and is critical of Reimer’s “incipient Trinitarian modalism” and its accompanying “inadequate Christology.” For Sider, the Incarnation itself is “ultimately and unimaginably strange.” Thus it is simplistic to equate divine otherness with transcendence alone, as Reimer implies, without taking the otherness of God’s immanence into account, as present in “the Christian story.”<sup>39</sup> This turn from abstract divine otherness to particularity, especially God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, aligns Sider with Weaver’s narrative-centered high Christology.<sup>40</sup> However, based on Weaver, I would add nonviolent resistance, itself profoundly counterintuitive and

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<sup>35</sup> Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 40–41.

<sup>36</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487, 492.

<sup>37</sup> Also see Miroslav Volf’s arguments in Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 251.

<sup>38</sup> Sider critiques Scott Holland as well. J. Alexander Sider, “The Hiddenness of God and the Justice of God: Negative Theology as Social Ethical Resource,” in *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice*, ed. David L. Weaver-Zercher and William H. Willimon (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 120–22, and Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Sider, “Hiddenness of God,” 122. See also Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, “O Sweet Exchange: The Cross of Christ in the Drama of Reconciliation,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 279–86.

<sup>40</sup> Sider, “Hiddenness of God,” 122.

mysterious, to the particularity of God's otherness, something that neither Reimer nor Sider recognizes. In fact, because Reimer refuses to privilege Jesus' nonviolence, it becomes unclear what exactly Jesus reveals about God if anything, resulting in a form of Christological agnosticism. With the exception of the moment of the cross, Reimer does not allow Jesus' message and example to permeate or even color his understanding of God, implying, somewhat ironically, a low Christology.

With regard to the cross, I suggest that Weaver's view of the Trinity is not sufficiently fluid precisely at the moment of crucifixion, which forecloses on any constructive meaning the cross might have in relation to human suffering. Although Weaver describes God as with Jesus throughout his life, death, and resurrection, he also argues that God "give[s] up the Son" to death on the cross: "God did not intervene in Jesus' death and allowed Jesus to die in fulfillment of his mission to bring redemption to all people." In addition, Weaver rejects the idea that the cross signifies God's love, since that line of argument fails to overcome the problem of God requiring violence (in this case, divine self-harm or "suicide") to show God's love.<sup>41</sup> While Weaver's concerns for avoiding the glorification of suffering and violence are legitimate, he neglects the experiences of those (including womanists and feminists) who find meaning in the cross insofar as it represents God's solidarity with those who suffer—symbolized, for instance, by imaging the crucified Christ as a woman, something that Weaver does not explore. Some thinkers argue that this view of the cross does not trap those who suffer in their pain or masochistically glorify it but, conversely, makes their resistance possible through God's nearness and sustaining love in the midst of struggle.<sup>42</sup> In privileging some feminist and womanist voices over others, Weaver maintains a harsh distance between Jesus and God at the moment of the cross, speaking of (a very human) Jesus' unwavering "obedience" to God's way of nonviolence as the only redeeming factor in the event of the crucifixion, the only way it was indirectly "willed by God." Here Weaver and

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<sup>41</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 44, 166-67, 245 n69; Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> See Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 77. She writes of a woman who has undergone trauma, finding meaning in the cross signifying that God "gets me. He knows" what it is like to suffer trauma. See also Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148.

Reimer share a low Christology, except that in Weaver's view it seems that Jesus must bear his suffering alone.<sup>43</sup>

Still, Weaver's effort to radically distance God from a punitive understanding of justice is warranted. Reimer and others who argue against feminist and womanist accusations of "divine child abuse" in the idea that God crucifies Godself overlook the fact that, as Weaver puts it, this argument "does not address the underlying, fundamentally violent assumption of satisfaction atonement, that divine justice requires the violence of punishment." For Weaver, it is necessary to reintroduce "the devil" or the powers of evil into the atonement and to comprehend that they, not God, were responsible for the cross; the difference between Jesus' (nonviolent) resurrection and his violent death encapsulates the distinction between "the modus operandi of the reign of God" and "that of the rule of evil."<sup>44</sup>

Although Reimer fears this line of thought leaves God helpless in the face of evil and violence (implying that the cross is a symbol of divine helplessness and an inadequate response to evil, sin, and violence, according to Darrin W. Snyder Belousek),<sup>45</sup> Weaver's emphasis on the resurrection as an act of forgiveness suggests that God's way of confronting evil and sin is profoundly mysterious as well. Because of his attention to those who have historically been told that "submission to abusive authority [is] a virtue," Weaver calls himself a "recovering nonresistant Mennonite" and thus advocates human *and divine* nonviolent resistance to evil, seen most clearly in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God confronts, and deals with, violence but is not limited to the tactics of retaliation and further violence.<sup>46</sup> Reimer and others begin with a human sense of justice as punitive and violent, thereby accepting the assumption that peace, understood as nonresistance, is passive and limited. But Weaver, beginning with the nonviolent life of Jesus Christ and the mystery of the resurrection, arrives at this dramatically

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<sup>43</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 299, 244-45 n69. See also 91-92. It remains unclear whether Weaver is promoting the doctrine of divine impassability or not. I would argue that he is, at least implicitly.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 251, 308.

<sup>45</sup> See Belousek's response to Peter W. Martens. Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 423 n38.

<sup>46</sup> Weaver, "Response," 39; Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 47, 237, 308, 37, 42.

“other” and transformed definition of justice as nonviolent.

Thus, Weaver’s assertion of God’s nonviolence does not, as Reimer contends, impinge upon God’s “otherness.” Rather, if we emphasize the intimacy between God and Jesus Christ such that we can speak of the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of *God*, then divine otherness is redefined. No longer an abstract, transcendent otherness, it paradoxically becomes a radically particular, immanent form of otherness that includes the counter-intuitive “otherness” of nonviolence, peacemaking, and restorative justice as God’s acts of peaceable resistance to evil and sin—acts that Christians are called to imitate, even image. This brings me to questions of Christian ethics, and the disagreement between Reimer and Weaver there.

### **Which Discipleship? Nonviolent Ethics and the Imitation of God**

Reimer’s emphasis on God’s otherness leads him to make a twofold claim about human ethics: on the one hand, Christians are to imitate Jesus Christ and be nonviolent; on the other, nonviolence cannot be projected onto God, who is beyond human ethics. These two are linked, since it is “precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.” God’s violence, wrath, and judgement, far from operating as a summons for human violence, make human nonviolence possible.<sup>47</sup> However, Reimer is not an absolute pacifist, and he rejects the notion that nonviolence alone can address the complex conflicts of the present global context (genocide, new forms of terrorism, etc.), and the enormous responsibility to “protect vulnerable people.”<sup>48</sup> He finds support for holy war, just war, and pacifism in the Bible. He is therefore is less concerned with avoiding violence at all costs and more suspicious of claims that it is possible to purify oneself or the church from complicity in all forms of violence; because of the reality of sin, even those committed to nonviolence can carry out such an ethic only in “penultimate and fragmentary ways.”

Here, Reimer presents a middle way between the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, who spoke of the “impossibility (of following the Jesus

<sup>47</sup> Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 487, 492.

<sup>48</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 158-59, 156, 160.

ethic),” and a Mennonite peace ethic, which does not permit sin “to cancel out the normativity of love.”<sup>49</sup> Reimer’s proposed middle way involves “just policing,” which aims “to restrain evil and maintain order for the common good,” and thus constitutes an alternative to war and its “culture of killing.” While just policing cannot avoid the use of violence, even deadly violence, it can be guided by the call to love the enemy.<sup>50</sup> Through the atonement, Reimer argues, God “forgives us our sins, even our violence, without excusing them,” since “the loving God is amid death and violence in ways that are not clear to us.”<sup>51</sup>

As suggested above, Weaver holds more absolutely to nonviolent resistance, but also accounts for the reality of sin, making human evil directly responsible for the violence of the cross instead of attempting to excuse it as God’s will or as necessary for redemption. To sin is to side with the powers of evil against God, and thus to be responsible for the cross. The alternative offered by God

occurs when we switch sides, from the side of the powers arrayed against the rule of God to the side of the reign of God. This . . . engages our own responsibility. It is represented by Jesus’ call, “Follow me,” which is presumed in the Anabaptist emphasis on “discipleship.” On the other hand . . . we cannot save ourselves, we cannot successfully oppose the powers of evil on our own. We need help. That help is the transforming action of God to grab us and change us to the side of the reign of God in spite of ourselves. To put that in trinitarian language, this transforming action is the Holy Spirit. . . .<sup>52</sup>

Weaver does not place his hope in our ability to turn away from sin on our own, nor is he naïvely optimistic about what the life of faith

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, 131, 113, and Reimer, *Dogmatic Imagination*, 67-68.

<sup>50</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 159, 167, 169-70; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 494. Strikingly, Hauerwas states that the *church* is the Christian alternative to war. See Stanley Hauerwas, “On Being a Church Capable of Addressing a World at War: A Pacifist Response to the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral *In Defence of Creation* (1988),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 429.

<sup>51</sup> Reimer, *Christians and War*, 173; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 492.

<sup>52</sup> Weaver, “Response,” 44. Weaver is stressing that Anabaptists do not believe in predestination.

entails, since it may involve suffering and even death, as Jesus exemplifies. In Weaver's words, nonviolent resistance "costs us our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth."<sup>53</sup> Yet, Reimer's concern about ethical oversimplification is applicable to Weaver's understanding of nonviolent resistance. Weaver sets up a stark dichotomy between good and evil, suggesting that those who "switch sides," as he puts it, are somehow no longer complicit in evil.<sup>54</sup> He thus barely brushes the moral ambiguities and tragedies involved in practicing nonviolent resistance, such as weighing conflicting responsibilities, the multiple effects of actions taken and not taken, the complexity of intentions, human capacities for self-deception, and so on.<sup>55</sup> Without diluting his commitment to the viability and possibilities of a nonviolent ethic, Weaver could do more to acknowledge its limits.

However, Reimer's own view is not immune to a similar critique, for he could be said to be overly optimistic concerning policing. He neglects to mention the profound ambiguities involved there, including whether police mainly protect privileged elites and their property, the realities of racial profiling, police brutality, and the level of violence promoted in the training and protocols of police officers, such as "shoot-to-kill."<sup>56</sup> And while Reimer would like to make a sharp distinction between policing and war, the prevalence of police brutality and, for instance, the "policing" role of the Canadian military on an international scale make such a distinction difficult to maintain. In addition, Weaver's critique of the punitive, violent definition of justice within the United States justice system indicates his recognition that even institutions claiming to limit violence actually perpetuate it.<sup>57</sup> With regard to policing, it seems that Reimer actually allows the reality of sin and violence to trump "the normativity of love"; the latter ultimately proves to be inadequate, in his view.

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<sup>53</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 315, 312-13.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*, 318.

<sup>55</sup> For further reflection on the limits of nonviolence, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1977), 68-69, and Stanley Hauerwas, "A Church Capable," 432, 456.

<sup>56</sup> For a similar critique of Reimer's notion of "just policing," see Andy Alexis-Baker, "The Gospel or a Glock? Mennonites and the Police," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 23-49.

<sup>57</sup> Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 2-3.



Perhaps the most striking criticism that Weaver makes of Reimer is his insistence that human behavior images divine behavior. Reimer argues that God's otherness must be preserved, and that God's violence prevents human violence rather than fosters it. Weaver points out that "the key ethical question is whether Christians imitate God's vengeance,"<sup>58</sup> and compares a violent God to "a loving parent who viciously attacks when provoked and then tells the children to 'do as I say, not as I do.'"<sup>59</sup> Remarkably, Reimer retains the image of a violent God *and* interprets one sort of violence (just policing) as a form of enemy-love. Even in this rigorously limited way, Reimer makes a space for humanity to imitate God's violence. Thus, for him, as for Weaver, human ethics do end up imaging God.

This result returns us to the question of how God's otherness is to be understood. Reimer and others are concerned that human notions of nonviolence are projected onto God such that God is made in our image as pacifists. But I would ask how exactly nonviolence reflects the human image since, as Reimer recognizes, even those committed to nonviolence cannot entirely escape complicity in various forms of violence. How can it be that Weaver "put[s] the nonviolent horse before the biblical cart," as Harry J. Huebner argues,<sup>60</sup> when Weaver derives that nonviolence from the Bible itself, i.e., from God's particularly other self-revelation in Christ, as I have argued above? This seems to lead to a chicken-and-egg conundrum: which came first, God's nonviolence or ours?

Combining Reimer's and Weaver's emphases, Belousek argues that while God is free to exercise an "exclusive right to retribution," God's forgiveness offered in the cross indicates that God is "free to transcend retribution" as well.<sup>61</sup> Going beyond Belousek, I contend that limiting God to vengeance and a retributive understanding of justice places greater constraints on God than do notions of God's nonviolent otherness. Restorative justice as glimpsed in Jesus Christ is arguably more profound

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Weaver quoting Sharon Baker in "Response," 46.

<sup>60</sup> Harry J. Huebner, "Atonement: Being Remembered," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, 237.

<sup>61</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 406, 394; emphasis in original. See also Duane K. Friesen, "Is God Nonviolent?," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11, and Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Nonviolent?," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 16-17.

than its alternative, which would confine God to the cycle of violence and retribution.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the case for God's nonviolence is rooted in divine freedom rather than in a misconstrued claim that God cannot be (i.e., is prevented from being) violent, and also establishes that it is God's prior choice to "transcend" retribution and violence which is subsequently imaged by human nonviolence, not the other way around—if the two can even be severed in this way (since God makes possible, and works through, human nonviolence). Although human nonviolence is a limited, imperfect, non-identical image of God's nonviolence, it does not thereby cease to be a realizable and profound possibility, precisely because it has its source in God.

I also take issue with the related assumption that God is simply "other" in the sense of being everything humanity is not, in direct opposition. While Sider expresses concern over this issue from the divine side—in that such an assumption reduces divine otherness to transcendence alone and fails adequately to account for the paradox of divine immanence, especially the immanent transcendence of the Incarnation—the problem arises from the human side as well, namely, that divine otherness understood simply as "other-than-humanity" also presupposes an abstract and generic humanity. That is, when Reimer and others insist that God is "other," the crucial question "Other than who?" remains unanswered. If God simply replicates human impulses toward retributive violence on a grander scale, then God is not "other" than those who dominate, which results in a god limited to a violent understanding of justice and power. As nonviolent feminist-liberationist theologian Dorothee Soelle wonders, "Why should we honor and love a being who does not transcend the moral level of contemporary culture as shaped by men, but instead establishes it?"<sup>63</sup>

In claiming that God is "other" than the powerful, privileged, and dominating, one arguably touches on God's mystery in a radical way. This is where Weaver's turn to the experiences of the oppressed is so crucial.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Weaver speaks of the "cyclical nature of violence" in *Nonviolent God*, 143-44.

<sup>63</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 24-25, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Elaine Swartzentruber makes a similar point, arguing that "It matters where we stand to view the violence" in the world, and in sharing the perspective of the oppressed "perhaps all violence looks like violence," instead of God's presumably loving judgment. See her "Response 2" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 42-44.

Yet even Weaver does not go far enough in championing this form of divine otherness, for in his understanding God is still in control of history, as seen most clearly in the resurrection as God's unequivocal victory over evil.<sup>65</sup> As Sider rightly points out, such arguments imply that God's power is the same as that employed by the powers of evil, that God is somehow "in competition with created powers" and "the only issue is quantity" of power. Though he makes a case for the "incomparability of God's power,"<sup>66</sup> I suggest, with Soelle, that it is rather a matter of God's power being of an altogether different sort—namely, the "shared power" of vulnerability and love, which places God in solidarity with those who suffer (e.g., Matt. 25). Only this redefinition of divine power can sidestep the questions of theodicy that invariably arise with notions of God's control over history (i.e., questions around the inaction of a presumably omnipotent God in the face of innocent human suffering—or divine bystanderism),<sup>67</sup> and thus make for a more thoroughly nonviolent view of God. And this would of course intensify the Christian incentive to renounce violence and embrace vulnerability as well, since Christians are called to image the vulnerable God of peace in the world.<sup>68</sup>

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Despite their great differences (and the related absence of that co-authored volume), Weaver and Reimer together provide a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics of late 20th-century Mennonite theology as it moves into systematic theology. I side with Weaver in privileging the particular nonviolence of the narratives of Jesus over abstract notions of God's otherness that limit God to a violent paradigm and spill over into blessing human violence. Informed

<sup>65</sup> In *Nonviolent God*, Weaver takes several tentative steps in the direction of divine "vulnerability" and "risk" but then reasserts God's omnipotence. Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 103, 269, 269 n32, 143-44.

<sup>66</sup> J. Alexander Sider, "Who Durst Defy the Omnipotent to Arms': The Nonviolent Atonement and a Non-Competitive Doctrine of God," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*, 251, 253, 259.

<sup>67</sup> See Soelle, *Suffering*, 92-95.

<sup>68</sup> Soelle abandons resurrection as a supernatural event in abandoning God's omnipotence. See *Theology for Skeptics*, 103ff., 117, and Dorothee Soelle, *The Mystery of Death*, trans. Nancy and Martin Lukens-Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 83, 71, 132. See also Friesen's similar critique of Volf in Friesen, "Is God Nonviolent?" 11.

by the concerns of Reimer and other theologians, Mennonite and beyond, I find it helpful to reframe Weaver's assertion of divine nonviolence in terms of a transformed understanding of God's "otherness," not simply as divine inscrutability but as an invitation to participate in God's nonviolent transformation of humanity and the world, which involves an awareness of the limitedness—but also the profound possibilities—of human nonviolent ethics.

Ultimately I must say with Sider that God both is and is not a pacifist, or rather is and is not nonviolent. God is not nonviolent in Reimer's sense of simply avoiding or failing to address violence, which suggests a god constructed in the image of human understandings of passive nonresistance. I would agree with Reimer—as, I believe, would Weaver!—that God is *nonresistant* pacifist. But God is nonviolent in Weaver's sense of being the originator and source of a peace which in its otherness "surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), and yet is revealed in Jesus Christ as being so immanently transcendent, so near to humanity, that God desires and makes it possible for Christians to image and incarnate it in this world of violence, retribution, and domination. Thus, as the above study suggests, though Weaver's response to this question makes significant strides in the right direction—taking seriously the experiences of the oppressed, including women, for a more consistently nonviolent Mennonite peace theology—more remains to be done. The vestiges of violence identified by Weaver are not the only problematic aspects of Mennonite peace theology. Mennonites have more to learn from feminists and womanists about the vestiges of power as absolute control and domination that remain within our peace theology and that require the further re-imagining of God as reflecting and resisting the suffering of "the least" through God's mysterious, vulnerable nonviolence.

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