

## Response 2

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So, is God nonviolent or not? Why is it that we ask ourselves and our theologians to answer this question? Are we looking for irrefutable proof that our theological and political stance of nonviolence is, in the end, the right Christian position? Are we wanting, as Paul Keim suggests, to have God on our side, particularly as our side has less and less political and social appeal in North America?

Perhaps. But if we are looking for such irrefutable proof, we won't find it in this collection of essays from Mennonite scholars, all of whom confess the normativity of nonviolence for Christian discipleship without requiring absolute conviction that God, Godself, is indeed nonviolent. As these writers remind us, the most honest answer about the absolute nature of God is always, "I don't know." What we believe and articulate about God usually tells us more about ourselves than about an objective transcendent reality. As we've all learned from Gordon Kaufman, naming God is an exercise in naming our own deepest desires and hopes that through imaginative reason transcend the limits of time and space. To speak of God is to speak of what we believe or imagine to be real, even while we confess the limits of our knowledge about God. How we name or imagine God matters, in part, because it names or imagines a preferred vision of the world set right (eschatology) and of appropriate behavior toward that world (ethics).

When we seek an answer to God's nonviolence (or not) we're asking after what kind of world we wish to live in and what kind of reality we wish to affirm. To ponder the nonviolence of God points to a deep longing and desire for the end of violence and the pain that violence brings to our world. It is a naming of our desire for abundant life — *everyone 'neath their own vine and figtree, living in peace and unafraid*. Such a longing requires us to recall the constitutive role of imagination and vision as both source and warrant for

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theological reflection and ethical directive.

Duane Friesen makes this point well in his sixth thesis, in which he offers us an alternative to the Just War, the Schleithelm, and the “God on a white horse” perspectives on the possibilities of nonviolence. Friesen asks us to imagine what kind of world we want to live in and how we might get to it. Always remember to connect means and ends. Violence might get us somewhere, but it begets more violence. Nonviolence might get us somewhere else. What might it beget? Friesen rightly challenges the church to develop an alternative politics of nonviolence and to find practical ways to make nonviolence work in a world of violence. Here Friesen joins Keim’s persistently nagging voice calling us to move beyond limiting imagination and vision to pretty dreams of quiet in the land of peace to “a prophetic consciousness, a corporate hermeneutic, evangelical courage, sectarian energy, and radical, eschatological hope” (32).

Such an active imagination and such a bold hope for realistic and pragmatic nonviolence are not merely the visions of good (though perhaps too idealistic) people. This vision and this hope is deeply grounded in and warranted by the story that we embrace in making theologically imaginative claims to the Christian faith. Ted Grimsrud makes this point well. Pointing us to the ambiguity about violence and nonviolence in the usual sources of theological reflection — scripture, tradition, and experience — Grimsrud relies on imaginative reason to ask us what we need to make the world a better place. Grounding his vision in the norm in the life and teachings of Jesus, he finds an interpretive key that allows him to “see the consistent nonviolence of God being expressed amidst these mixed signals of history and present experience” (17). The norm of Jesus’ way convinces Grimsrud that whatever the nature of God in Godself may or may not be, when God became human, Jesus was the human that God became. And from Jesus, both from what he taught and what he did, we have a vision of active, audacious nonviolence. When God became human, that human rejected violence and we humans must do likewise.

Mary Schertz also appeals to Jesus as the pragmatic model for our human lives and does so in a way that emphasizes the raising of Jesus as the final sign and seal of God’s mercy and God’s love, trumping God’s violence and judgment found in that mixed bag of scripture, tradition, and experience. Her focus on the resurrection is an important one, often forgotten in discussions

of violence and non-violence. Apparently God approves of what Jesus did to the point that his life and death have inaugurated a new heaven and a new earth — that very vision of abundant life and fig trees. Schertz presses her point too far, however, when she claims that the resurrection might allow us to posit that God Godself is indeed nonviolent. When we see God acting in seemingly violent ways, it is to draw “earth’s people into the circle of God’s love,” she says (36). She immediately notes that such loving violence is God’s prerogative and not a command to humans.

More troubling than differentiating between God’s ethic and human ethic is the vision inherent in Schertz’s lovingly violent God. If “God” is the naming of the deepest longings and desires of a community, what kind of community longs for the equation of violence and love? Do I want to be part of a community that believes that God would use violence to draw the people of the earth into the circle of God’s love? If our preferred vision of the world is the one we believe initiated by the new creation of nonviolence and abundance in the resurrection, why are we equating violence with love, even in our theological constructs? This smacks of Friesen’s critique of the “God on a white horse” and is deeply problematic to the claims that Schertz herself makes for the normativity of nonviolence evidenced by the resurrection.

Along with the grounding of a vision of non-violence in Jesus’ way, a final norm of Christian nonviolence might be culled out from Schertz’s essay, particularly her footnoted interchange with J. Denny Weaver concerning social location. This norm might be termed a norm of “solidarity” and be warranted by the Hebraic understanding of *Shekinah* and/or Christian understandings of incarnation and the Holy Spirit (among others!). It is a norm of standing with, particularly standing with the suffering, and is well expressed by the story of Hagar, the experience of African American women, and the Womanist theology to which Weaver referred in his comment. This norm bears more elucidation in the context of Schertz’s essay and the solidarity which she posits in it.

In elucidating her thoughts on the causes of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Schertz calls us as wealthy Americans to an uncomfortable solidarity of complicity with the circumstances of massive global injustice, self-serving foreign policy, and incessant violence that form the context of the attacks and continue to wreak havoc and misery around the world. This call to solidarity must be taken very seriously if we are to take personally the call to a politics

of nonviolence. We must acknowledge that we, even the most pacifistic and visionary among us, participate in massive violence every day. Violence that actively destroys the earth and her creatures. Any claims to nonviolence, whether practical or theological, do nothing to thwart this violence unless they are accompanied with concrete political, social, and economic action resisting and counteracting it. Even so, we are people of unclean lips and must stand in solidarity to be convicted by a judgmental God who cannot and will not tolerate the violence we perpetrate.

But this solidarity of complicity is not the only kind of solidarity that might serve as norm for a radically visionary and practical nonviolence. For while Schertz is clearly correct in calling us to acknowledge complicity, she is not correct in claiming that God's judgment is impartial. She seems to recognize this when admitting that God sometimes seems to act in violent ways in scripture, history, and experience. We must ask what that apparent violence of God accomplishes and what, according to those who understood such violence to be God-initiated, it means. For if the Biblical witness of violence and the paradigmatic example of Jesus' nonviolence tell us anything, it is that God's favor and God's judgment are extraordinarily partisan. This is what I, and apparently Weaver, have learned from liberation theologies of all kinds. God's favor always goes to the weak, the poor, the last, and the least. God's judgment always goes to the strong, the rich, the first, and the most.

"We" may all share responsibility for the world's violence, but we must not erase the importance of social location. Solidarity of complicity does not mean that we all share the same kind of responsibility or judgment. I, a white, upper middle class university professor, have a different kind of judgment vested upon me than does the homeless man I pass in my car on my way from a fulfilling, satisfying job to my comfortable oil-heated, centrally air-conditioned home. He and I are both part of the "we" of this nation, but the parts that we play and the benefits that we reap are vastly different. Our complicity is also vastly different, and the judgment of September 11 on our lives and our beings is vastly different.

So too, must our visions of nonviolence be grounded in a norm of solidarity. I do share a solidarity of complicity with the violence in our world and I must acknowledge that, repent of it, and strive for something else. That something else should be a solidarity with the least as an active, audacious

vision of abundant life for everyone beneath their own vine and fig tree. The view from under another's vine and fig tree is not the view from mine.

An investment in this kind of solidarity requires me always to acknowledge social location and the difference it makes. It requires me to be as partial as I imagine my God to be. Surely Schertz knows this, probably better than the other writers in this collection. I find it illuminating that she alone was challenged on the issue of social location; no one asked any of the white men on the panel to account for difference in their papers. Of course, none of the other papers so pointedly accused its audience of complicity with the forces of evil and violence in the world either.

Nonetheless, Schertz's failure to announce solidarity with the least in a posture of active nonviolence as the logical next step from a solidarity of complicity is unfortunate. Complicity with the rich ought really to lead to solidarity with the poor. Recognizing how my own view from beneath a very nice vine and fig tree is protected by an unacknowledged wall of social, political, economic, and physical violence, i.e., "the sword," ought to cause me to find other vines and fig trees, particularly those where the sword isn't so nicely hidden behind hedges of privilege. It is the vision of the safety and shalom of those other vines and fig trees that a solidarity with the least calls us to. Perhaps Schertz's open possibility of a lovingly violent God has clouded the picture. If God's violent judgment can equal God's love, we are oddly left without ground to stand on to work actively against violence and we can only acknowledge our complicity with it. How are we to know what is violence for violence's sake and what is violence drawing the people of the earth into the circle of God's love, that is, God's judgment? It matters where we stand to view the violence. And if we stand in solidarity with the least, perhaps all violence looks like violence, and God's love looks like something else altogether. Perhaps in solidarity with the least we might imagine an active and bold nonviolence that brings about the hope of the resurrection rather than the despair of the cross.

Or so I imagine it.