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CAN RELIGION HELP?
USING JOHN HOWARD YODER AND MOHANDAS GANDHI TO
CONCEPTUALIZE NEW APPROACHES TO INTRACTABLE SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL PROBLEMS SUCH AS VIOLENCE AND WAR

by

GREGORY TODD KEETER

Under the Direction of Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

Religious Studies is making possible a scholarly study of many aspects of human religious traditions and practices, but the field has yet to articulate fully the ability of such study to affect the creation of new approaches to intractable social and political problems. Many of these problems have as their basis religious justifications, yet the rigor of academic thought has only barely begun to clarify the underlying religious reasoning.

Through this essay I intend to provide clarity to some of the underlying religious justifications for war and violence by examining the religious writings of two widely recognized theologians that firmly oppose war and violence, John Howard Yoder and Mohandas Gandhi.

The result is an examination on the utility of using religious ideas as sources of insights and strategies for addressing social and political issues such as war and violence.

INDEX WORDS: Religious studies, Pacifism, John Howard Yoder, Mohandas Gandhi, Religion, Social and political philosophy, Religious approaches to social and political problems

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Gregory Todd Keeter
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE BASIS OF WAR.....	1
2. YODER ON JESUS' ORIGINAL REVOLUTION.....	5
<i>An Overview of Yoder's Argument</i>	5
<i>The Conventional Understanding of Pacifism</i>	7
<i>The Good News Message</i>	9
<i>A New Kind of Community</i>	17
<i>New Ethics for a New Community</i>	19
<i>Evaluation of Yoder's Methodology and Interpretation</i>	30
<i>Conclusion</i>	32
3. GANDHI'S CONCEPTION OF SATYAGRAHA.....	36
<i>An Overview of Gandhi's Argument</i>	36
<i>The Traditional Interpretation of the story of Arjuna</i>	38
<i>A Framework for Satyagraha: Gandhi's Unique Interpretation of the Arjuna Story</i>	40
<i>Constructing Satyagraha: Action, Nonattachment, and Sacrifice</i>	44
<i>Satyagraha: A Model for Social and Political Action</i>	48
<i>Conclusion</i>	56
4. SIMILARITIES IN THE VIEWS OF YODER AND GANDHI	57
<i>An Overview</i>	57

<i>Corresponding Methodologies</i>	57
<i>Breaking Down Violence</i>	60
<i>What is Pacifism?</i>	62
<i>The Need for Change</i>	64
<i>The Role of Action</i>	65
<i>The Proper Role of Religion</i>	67
<i>God's Goal for Humanity</i>	68
<i>Conclusion</i>	70
5. USING RELIGIOUS SOURCES TO DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS.....	71
<i>Introduction</i>	71
<i>Why should we use religious ideas?</i>	72
<i>Conducive Aspects of Religion for Responding to Social and Political Problems with Success</i>	73
<i>Synthesis of Yoder and Gandhi's Ideas on War and Violence</i>	76
<i>Conclusion</i>	80
WORKS CITED	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

Chapter 1. Introduction: Understanding the Basis of War

In this essay I intend to identify, evaluate, and compare the concepts of pacifism as expressed by John Howard Yoder and Mohandas Gandhi, two men who both take as axiomatic the position that war is never the best answer to conflict. The main goal behind presenting these exegeses is to reflect on the utility of using religious ideas as sources of insights and strategies for addressing social and political issues.

Some will think the recent U.S. history of war inspires this essay, and it does to a degree, but to rely too much on this connection is to overlook the complexity of the issue. Doing this makes the recent history of war more exceptional than history indicates it ought to be viewed. War has always been part of “recent history,” and so is, by this standard, always relevant. Humanity has always used violence to further social and political ends. The fact that war is ever present is one of the most enduring of themes in human history.

What is it about war that accounts for its centrality in human history? One answer to this question is that many people believe that war is the best solution to a certain type of predicament (usually a conflict). While this is an obvious answer, it is too simplistic to be of much help in apprehending the issue. We can find a more useful analysis by concentrating on what supports the *belief* that war is the best solution. While not every belief requires a strong

justification, war with its extremely high costs makes strong justifications essential.

Yoder and Gandhi challenge these commonly held justifications that support war. They do this in various ways such as by pointing out the inconsistencies and ineffectiveness of war, but they also do more than simply point out these well-documented problems. While acknowledging the genuine and real nature of the problems people face, Yoder and Gandhi provide an alternative set of principles that support resolving conflicts without resorting to violence and war.

In contrast, an example of a principle supporting war is the concept of necessary evil. Many people understand war as a necessary evil. Aurelius Augustine (354 – 430 C.E.) introduced this concept, which is (in this context) that war causes evil but that *this* evil is necessary to serve a greater good. The concept of necessary evil implies that some expressions of good and evil are better or worse than others. This is the concept that good and evil are not absolute measures but rather are relative. This recognition allows actions that otherwise could not be morally approved or sanctioned to be approved since they serve the greater good. When a person does evil for a greater good she is not considered an evil person, rather she is actually being good.

While the conception of a necessary evil seems imminently rational, there are many problems associated with it. Also, since referring to the principle of necessary evil enables many wartime actions, the many problems associated with this principle also emerge in these actions. For instance, the concept of necessary evil supports the belief that one person killing another can be a good act. If

someone kills another under the circumstance and rules of a just war, then the killing is classified as a morally acceptable act. In this context, killing a human being during a just war is a necessary act that is itself evil, but here because it furthers the greater good as embodied in the just war it is a good act. A just war is a war entered and conducted based, in part, on the conviction that doing so serves a greater good, and that more good will result than evil. Therefore, actions for a just war are deemed good because they support the higher purpose of the just war.

Gandhi and Yoder reject the assertion that an evil act can be good, even in the “right” circumstance. I think it likely Gandhi and Yoder would respond that those that who call upon the concept of necessary evil are using it as a pretext to convince others of the rightness of the act. From this perspective, the concept of necessary evil is a rationalization that simulates rational thinking where there actually is very little or none. Yet, the concept of necessary evil illustrates several points relevant to the thesis of this essay. It shows the domination that underlying principles have both in enabling and shaping the actions of people. The necessary evil example also illustrates the effect that flaws in underlying principles have on the actions they justify. Yoder and Gandhi, at least implicitly, recognize this and respond by selecting those principles that they feel are most worthy of being followed by action. Unsurprisingly, they both find their answers in their religions.

John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) was a Christian Mennonite theologian who had a long and influential career teaching and writing about Christianity. He is best known for his insightful interpretation of Jesus’ message as pacifistic. To

say Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) was influential is an understatement. His reputation is so well known it is almost inconceivable that any adult in today's world would not know at least his name. What is less well known is how Gandhi developed his philosophy of pacifism. He used his study of Hinduism and his "experiments in Truth" to develop it. These men were very different, but their ideas have an astonishing similarity.

It seems unlikely that two men separated by many thousands of miles and from very different cultures working from different and ancient religious texts would independently come to similar conclusions about war and peace. The fact that they have done so generates the possibility that they may be on to something worthy of our attention. This observation is one of the things that initially struck me, and it in no small way drives the thesis of this essay. No one can deny the prominence of religion in our conception of what war and peace mean. Yet, religious ideas are underutilized when it comes to shaping and responding to the moral challenges posed by war and other pressing social and political issues. By reflecting on and evaluating what Gandhi and Yoder have to say about pacifism, I intend to examine the possible role that more actively integrating religious ideas might have in addressing issues like war.

Yoder and Gandhi openly advocate the elimination of war. As we will see in the following exegeses, they both think advocating and engaging in war is untenable moral positions and that choosing war is, therefore, always wrong. In this essay I hope to show how both men justify their pacifistic positions and, in the larger context, to show how religious ideas are a rich source of ideas and wisdom useful in addressing the most difficult of social and political problems.

Chapter 2. Yoder on Jesus' Original Revolution

John Howard Yoder, in his book *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, clarifies how nonviolence and pacifism are supported through Jesus' message of "Good News." Yoder contextualizes and elucidates the significance of this message and its implications for personal and social change. In this chapter, I will explicate Yoder's logic and elaborate on his interpretation of this message, especially that part that is significant to his pacifism.

An Overview of Yoder's Argument

My exegesis follows closely Yoder's organization, but before diving into the details, I want to offer an overview. Yoder begins by looking closely at long-held beliefs about what pacifism means. This exegesis is important in laying the groundwork for understanding Yoder's rethinking of the meaning of the Good News message and its implications, especially those affecting pacifism. Yoder then moves directly to the content of the Good News message. The message as Yoder sees it is that radical change is coming in both personal attitudes and social practices. The changes in personal attitudes include the concepts of repentance and what Yoder calls, "turning the mind around." These changes in personal attitude support change in social practices. Yoder presents and interprets these changes in social practices as a series of challenges facing Jesus. Yoder's interesting account includes four options Jesus faced in how to act. A premise

basic to this part of Yoder's analysis is that humanity does not change, or at least they do not change in their basic character and motivations. The social and personal issues faced by Jesus and by the people of his time are the same as those faced by the people of all times. These choices include realism, righteous religious violence, withdrawal from society, and "proper religion." After contextualizing Jesus' response, Yoder then examines what implications Jesus' example has for reevaluating personal attitudes and society choices.

Yoder concludes that the Good News message is about a new type of community. This new community was to be radically different than any community of Jesus' day. Yoder asserts this community was unprecedented in many ways, including its mixing of race, economics, politics, and religion. Further, membership was voluntary, quite unlike the traditional communities of the time. Just as radical was the way this new community responded to problems. It did not resort to revenge against offenders but forgave them. Violence directed at the community was met with suffering, not more violence. Jesus did not command the community as a dictator, rather leadership was shared. Yet, this radically new response requires a new apprehension of the dynamics involved in human interaction.

Yoder supports his interpretation of this new dynamic of human interaction with seven ethics he derives from the Good News message. Many who are familiar with Christianity are also familiar with these ethics. These include ethics of repentance, testimony, and perfect love. Less well known components include the ethics of fulfillment, excess, discipleship, and reconciliation. Yoder asserts these ethics are mutually reinforcing.

The upshot is that war and violence are not justifiable through the Good News message or through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and so are not properly part of Christianity, according to Yoder. Yoder holds that while many conventional justifications of war and violence assert a connection to Jesus and his message, they are really about other reasons and are not justified by Jesus' example or his message. Yoder thinks the only correct interpretation of the Good News message is an anti-war and anti-violence message.

The Conventional Understanding of Pacifism

The generally accepted understanding of pacifism is that it is idealistic and therefore impractical as a real-world position, except by those holding extreme views. Yoder thinks such a criticism misunderstands the meaning of pacifism. Pacifism is the disavowing of the use of violence for personal or political ends, especially the rejection of social and political violence for political objectives. Yoder clarifies this understanding of pacifism by making two distinctions about the conventional meaning of pacifism.

The first distinction is one of the most widespread but incorrect interpretations of the contemporary pacifist commitment: "It is held that pacifism proceeds from a logical, deductive, impersonal kind of legalism taking certain biblical texts or certain ethical principles with utmost rigor, without asking whether it be possible or not to live up to such demanding ideals. This is what many mean by 'a Sermon-on-the-Mount ethic'" (Yoder 34). The idea is that pacifism can only be realized through a superhuman effort to maintain an impossible standard. Yoder rejects this depiction of pacifism as wrong. Yoder

has more to say on this issue in his discussion of the ethic of fulfillment, which I discuss later in this chapter.

The second distinction Yoder makes concerns a common interpretation of some of the implications of Jesus' pronouncement to love one's neighbor.

Ironically, this prescript is the source of a common justification and obligation to make war by Christians. The implication of this obligation is that we ought to defend our neighbors when they are threatened and in need of our help because of our love for them. Furthermore, the claim is made that it is right for us to act in this way even if it means killing and war are necessary, and it is wrong if we do not respond in this way. For Yoder this interpretation is both a misunderstanding and a rationalization. The misunderstanding is centered on what we take to be *why* we should love our neighbors, "We do not, ultimately, love our neighbor because Jesus told us to. We love our neighbor because God is like that. It is not because Jesus told us to that we love even beyond the limits of reason and justice, even to the point of refusing to kill and being willing to suffer - but because God is like that too" (Yoder 51). Jesus is but the messenger, not the message.

For Yoder, the argument that one must war to defend others is a rationalization because loving our neighbor is not the primary motivating reason for killing or war, but a pretext. The real reasons for war and killing come more out of fear, social and political pressures, and other factors than from a nation's desire to protect their neighbors and express their love through war. Contrary to what the conventional interpretation says, war does not originate from

individuals striving to follow Jesus' word and their attempts to stop threats to their neighbors.

The Good News Message

If pacifism is not something to be expressed as an absolute rule or principle and is not founded in the love we are supposed to have for one another, how are we to understand Jesus' messages on nonviolence and suffering? Answering this question is the essence of Yoder's efforts. He begins his analysis by contemplating the significance of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Yoder declares that Jesus accepted John the Baptist's message of Good News. Yoder holds that the meaning of "Good News" has changed over the years and that it is illustrative to contemplate what the meaning of the term would have been to people of John's and Jesus' time. Yoder says the original meaning of "Good News" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means good news as in news that "impinges upon the fate of the community" (Yoder 15). This is the type of good news that affects the whole community, like a son being born to the king or word that a distant battle had been won. The term was originally a secular one, not religious.

The Good News that John spoke of was that change was coming, and that this change was to be momentous. Many have taken this to mean the coming of Jesus, but to understand the good news in this way is to make the mistake of confusing the message with the messenger. This mistake leads to simplistic interpretations that allow the larger, more important message to go unnoticed (Yoder 16). This is analogous in form to taking the reason we should love our

neighbors to be because Jesus said we should, instead of understanding what Jesus actually said, which is that we do it because that is how God acts. The change that John heralded, which Jesus took as his own, promised that God would deliver radical change. As Yoder writes, "whatever it is that God is about to do, it will be good news for the poor, bad news for the proud and the rich; it will be change, including changed economic and social relations" (Yoder 16).

Radical change means a fundamentally new response to the most basic of human problems. The meaning of "Good News" and the change it brings are apparent when we move beyond the messenger to get to the message he carries. Yoder begins his analysis by distinguishing the change announced by the "Good News" in two basic ways. There are changes in personal attitudes and changes in social practices, but Yoder points out these changes are "inseparably" connected (17), so this distinction is only for clarity. For the purposes of this essay and analysis, the changes in social practice are of primary interest, but since the social is supported by the personal, we will begin there.

The changing of personal attitudes includes what Yoder called "repentance" and "turning-the-mind-around" (17). Yoder says that men of Jesus' era and earlier were especially aware of the fragility of life and looked to God to address their fear of death and what happens after death. Yoder says there is no "surprise that Christian preaching and poetry dealt with mortality and that the good news man needed was spoken of in terms of eternal life" (17). Likewise, some men had fears of judgment, anxiety and guilt, so here the good news was presented in terms of forgiveness, acceptance by God and other men (Yoder 17-8). Yoder says one can still see the Good News message interpreted in this way.

As Yoder writes, “In still other ages, other cultures, man thinks of his need as primarily for help in getting a job or in facing sickness or poverty.” To this Yoder responds, “why should they not” (Yoder 18).

The point is that the personal and more general needs for help are always with us.

But for Jesus in His time, and for increasing numbers of us in our time, the basic human dilemma is seen in less individualistic terms. The priority agenda for Jesus, and for many of us, are not mortality or anxiety, but unrighteousness, injustice. The need is not for consolation or acceptance but for a new directive in which men many live together in love. (Yoder 18)

The need for change in our social interactions is the larger, more important target. Changing individual attitudes could be difficult, but changing society and social interactions is more difficult if for no other reason than the many intransigent individuals that make up these institutions. Yet, this is the focus of Yoder’s analysis of Jesus’ message. The key to understanding the social changes in the Good News message of Jesus comes from understanding the conditions that Jesus encountered in his ministry.

Yoder declares that Jesus had the same four choices that face us today: realism, righteous religious violence, withdrawal from society, and “proper religion.” It is important to understand both what these choices are and why Jesus rejected these choices for a new approach. This new approach is part of the Good News message.

Realism is a common response to many issues and challenges. It is a strategy of action that says, “Be realistic,” which partly means accept the situation as it is. One aspect of the realism choice is that a completely new start is not an

available option. Yoder attributes this strategy of realism to the Herodians and Sadducees of Jesus' time (19).

Yoder asserts that if one avoids settling for a superficial understanding and digs into who these people were and what they were doing in Jesus' time, one can see beyond the stereotypes. While pursuing a philosophy of realism, Yoder writes the Herodians and Sadducees were not "nasty and scheming people; they were intelligent leaders following a responsible strategy. Their concern was to do the best one could in the situation" (19). These last eight words perfectly exemplify the social realism Yoder is talking about. Yoder declares that this plan of action is still very much in use today. He says one can see this in the way chaplains join the military, "It is the service of the chaplain to sanctify the existing order with the hope of being able progressively to improve it" (Yoder 20).

The chaplain has chosen society over his religion. This is the problem with realism and cause for its rejection. As Yoder puts it,

For it does come down to this; if religion is to sanction the order that exists it must defend that order even against criticism of the prophetic word, even at the cost of the life or the liberty of a prophet. The critic-from-within-the-establishment, the house prophet, will, if he stays inside when the crunch comes, be with Herod after all. This has not changed in our day. (Yoder 21)

The message is clear that one cannot internally change the status quo, but rather what will end up changed is the person making the attempt. Yoder says of the four choices, realism is the one most removed from Jesus as a possibility. Those in power were averse to him from the day of his birth, and Yoder states this choice of realism was the "only one which never could have come to His mind" (21). In a quotation that perfectly exemplifies the philosophy of realism and simultaneously explains the motivation for the killing of Jesus, Yoder points to

“Caiaphas, who stated that it was expedient that one life should be sacrificed – whether justly or unjustly mattered little – for the sake of the community” (21). According to Yoder, realism is not a proper understanding of Jesus’ message.

The second choice available to Jesus is what Yoder calls righteous revolutionary violence. This is using justified violence as a social and political tool. In Jesus’ time, this was the strategy of the Zealots, whose “zeal of the Lord” was to express itself in holy warfare against the infidel Romans” (Yoder 21). The idea is that invaders or oppressors know or respond to nothing but violence, so nothing other than violence can be effective. Of the four choices, this one seemed a real possibility for Jesus. In many ways he was similar to the Zealots, and, “He was perceived by some of His followers, and by the Herodians and Sadducees, as the nearest thing to a Zealot, and executed by the Romans on the grounds that He was one” (Yoder 22).

Yet Jesus rejected this route not because he might lose the revolution or because he wanted to avoid social conflict, for, as Yoder points out, at these points Jesus “was with the Zealots” (23). Rather Jesus rejected this choice because it does not address the underlying problem of violence.

His rejection of their righteous violence had another type of reason. He did not agree that to use superior force or cunning to change society from the top down by changing its rulers, was the real need. What is wrong with the violent revolution according to Jesus is that it changes too little; the Zealot is the reflection of the tyrant whom he replaces through the tools of the tyrant. The Zealot resembles the tyrant whom he attacks in the moral claims he makes for himself and his cause: "in the world, kings lord it over their subjects; and those in authority are called their country's 'Benefactors'. (Luke 22:25, Yoder 23)

While at many points Jesus agreed with the Zealots, according to Yoder, “What is ultimately wrong, for Jesus... is the order it produces cannot be new” (23-4). This method could not manage anything other than what had already come before. It

would bring along with it all killing and self-righteousness that was unacceptable because it violated people to serve its own cause. If this were at all acceptable, then there would be no need for the coming change heralded by the Good News message. Injustice remained inherently part of this strategy.

Other thinkers have recognized that revolution changes too little to be of much value, including Immanuel Kant. In his famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?" Kant wrote, "Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass" (Kant 42). Revolution effectively only succeeds in changing the names of those in charge, and nothing of substance changes.

The third option is simply withdrawing from society. "He could withdraw from the tension and conflicts of the urban center where government and commerce constantly polluted even the most well-intentioned son of the law, seeking to find a place where He could be pure and perfectly faithful" (Yoder 24). Today we see many escaping the city for the suburbs or the country. Others turn off the nightly news to avoid facing the problems of the day. In Jesus' day there were some who chose the ascetic life by living in the desert. Jesus, however, came from a small town and purposely left it for the city and the conflict he was sure to find there (Yoder 25). Isolating oneself may provide one with distance from distractions, but it does not serve to help reduce social injustice.

The fourth and the final option open to Jesus was what Yoder calls "proper religion." This is maintaining one's cultural and religious identity in the midst of

a competing and, in many ways, dominant culture. Proper religion is achieved by keeping one's beliefs and practice as distinct as possible from those of the surrounding alien culture. As Yoder explains, this is "represented in His [Jesus] society by the Pharisees. The Pharisees lived in the middle of urban society, yet they sought, like the desert sects, to keep themselves pure and separate. The root of the word 'Pharisee' means 'separate.' They kept themselves pure in the midst of the city by keeping rules of segregation" (Yoder 25-6).

Proper religion is a compromise that provides the seemingly best possible scenario. As Yoder puts it, "there are many who feel that it is both possible and desirable to distinguish by a clear line the 'spiritual' or the 'moral' issues, to which religion properly speaks, from 'social' and 'political' issues, which are not the business of religion. The theme of 'revolution' in our society is the prime example of what is not the Christian's concern" (Yoder 26). But, compromise is the real problem. Yoder clarifies the effects of compromise by writing, "The separation is really not that clean. To avoid revolution means to take the side of the establishment," and even more powerfully he declares, "To say that it is not the business of the church to second guess the experts on details of political or military strategy, to have judgments on the moral legitimacy of particular laws, is to give one's blessing to whatever goes on" (Yoder 26). This practice of not involving oneself with the greater community does not achieve the goal of insulating one from their influences. It means simply and silently agreeing with whatever they do. There can be no "clean hands" for those professing non-involvement since in truth there can be no non-involvement.

Yoder provides some plausible reasoning for why Jesus would not choose realism, righteous revolutionary violence, withdrawal from society, or “proper religion,” so what approach could Jesus choose if not these? Before attempting to answer this question, there is another preliminary question that is best asked: “What did Jesus say to do about the Good News message?” Yoder has already given a partial answer to this question when he pointed out that Jesus took John the Baptist’s message as his own. By doing so Jesus was also accepting the message that God first gave to Abraham. Yoder reminds us of the continuity of the larger story to the Good News message:

We must look back to what God had been doing or trying to do for a long, long time. The Bible story really begins with Abraham, the father of those who believe. Abraham was called to get up and leave Chaldea, the cultural and religious capital of known world in his age, to go he knew not where, to find he knew not what... he was told that it was through him the nations of the world would be blessed. In response Abraham promised his God that he would lead a different kind of life: a life different from the cultured and the religious peoples, whether urban or nomadic among whom he was to make his pilgrim way. (Yoder 27)

The Good News message is a continuation of the message first delivered to Abraham and completed through the chosen people. The idea that God was leading his people to a new life is contained within the Good News message. While the message of Jesus is usually considered to be entirely new and original, Yoder insists that the Good News message continues the message God has been sending for generations. Yoder calls this message the “original revolution: the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them” (28). The community Yoder describes fits

what sociology and philosophy call an intentional community.¹ This is the time when they were first called "Hebrews," a title which Yoder controversially asserts probably originally meant, "the people who crossed over" (Yoder 28).

A New Kind of Community

Jesus takes the Good News message to mean the same thing that Abraham took it to mean. As Yoder says, "Jesus did again what God had done in calling Abraham or Moses or Gideon or Samuel: He gathered His people around His word and His will. Jesus created around Himself a society like no other society mankind had ever seen" (28). Jesus created a new community with new ways of dealing with the problems of the world. This community, like Abraham's new community, was substantially different than any other community of its time.

Yoder lists some of the features that make this new community different from what came before it. It was a society mixed in all ways, including racially, religiously, politically, and economically. Yoder asserts that this was unprecedented. This new community broke with tradition in that it was a voluntary society that one could not be born into but had to choose to join by repenting one's past bad behavior and freely pledging allegiance. Yoder states that this new community was a society without any second-generation members. It was a society organized with new approaches to living life characterized by new relationships. These new approaches radically altered the conventional wisdom

¹ An intentional community is a community that people choose to be members. This is in contrast to a traditional community where most members are born into membership or otherwise obtain membership without their actively or personally choosing to be a member.

regarding appropriate responses to the challenges in living life; offenders were forgiven, violence was to be met with suffering, money was to be shared; leadership was also to be divided among all the members. New patterns of relationship between people illustrated "a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person" (Yoder 29).

The conventional understanding of this new society is that it is the Christian church. Usually, this idea is expressed by saying Jesus created the first church, but Yoder points out the original meaning of church is not how we use it today. The word is most accurately translated into assembly, parliament, or town meeting. As Yoder says, "the word which Jesus used in the Aramaic language, like the equivalent word which the New Testament writers used in the Greek Language, does not mean a gathering for worship nor an administration; it means a public gathering to deal with community business" (30). This community was intended not to coexist with existing societal norms, nor was it intended as a violent revolutionary response to the prevailing society, nor was it a withdrawal from the community, and the community's purpose was not to set itself aside from or as parallel to the general society. Jesus intended this new community to be a new expression of what it meant to be human.

Stanley Hauerwas in his essay, "The Servant Community," agrees with Yoder on this point. The institution of the Christian Church is not limited to religious concerns; rather "it is a call for the church to be a community that tries to develop the resources to stand within the world witnessing to the peaceable kingdom. The gospel is political. Christians are engaged in politics of the kingdom" (Hauerwas 377).

New Ethics for a New Community

With the new community comes a new ethic that serves as the foundation for the new ways of responding to the challenges of living life. Yoder lists seven such responses: the ethic of repentance, of discipleship, of testimony, of fulfillment, of perfect love, of excess, and of reconciliation. This is Yoder's analysis of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and does not represent a detailed exegesis. Rather Yoder seeks "simply to understand in its broadest and most axiomatic outlines, the widest framework within which Jesus spoke to moral issues... its structure and its logic" (36). Understanding these ethical axioms will begin to elucidate what Yoder means by pacifism.

Yoder begins as he does with much of his analysis by first assailing the conventional wisdom or common understanding of a concept, then elucidating or showing how the conventional understanding has been twisted from its original meaning. The religious conception of repentance is one of the more manipulated terms. As Yoder puts it,

Centuries of church history... have taught us to misunderstand radically what John the Baptist and Jesus meant when they began preaching, 'Repent! For the kingdom is at hand!' Under 'repentance' we think of remorse, regret, sorrow for sin. But, what they were calling for was a transformation of the understanding (metanoia), a redirected will ready to live in a new kind of world. (Yoder 38)

What has come to mean a public expression of guilt was originally meant to be a private opening of or transformation of understanding. Yoder says,

The teachings which follow refuse to measure by the standards of 'common sense' or 'realism' or 'reason'; they testify to the novelty of the kingdom that is at hand. Jesus will therefore be describing for us a morality of repentance or of conversion; not a prescription of what Every Man can should do, but a description of how a person behaves whose life has been transformed by meeting Jesus. (Yoder 38)

By citing the ethic of repentance as a description of how a person behaves and as a transformation of the understanding, Yoder is placing this ethic firmly within a theory of virtue ethics. The accent is on the individual *behaving in a way* that a “good person” behaves when faced with the example of Jesus, which directly counters the prescription of what every person *should do* that forms the conventional and very public display of repentance we have come to understand.

If in the ethic of repentance Yoder finds support for virtue ethics, then in the ethic of discipleship he finds evidence averse to consequentialism.

When Jesus... proclaims... the statutes of His rule, it is to His disciples. This is not a set of moral standards to be imposed on everyone or on the unconvinced. It is not proposed that persons using these standards can rule the unbelieving world accordingly, nor that they will be prosperous and popular. The ethic of discipleship is not guided by the goals it seeks to reach, but by the Lord it seeks to reflect. It is no more interested in 'success' or in 'effectiveness' than He. It is binding only upon those voluntarily enrolled in the band of His followers. It is assumed that they will be a minority in society; how the world would look if everyone would behave as they do is not a question we immediately need to answer. (Yoder 38-9)

The main concept supporting the idea that consequences do not matter is that if one is reflecting Godly values then there is no cause to fear the consequences of one's actions. An implication of this concept is that there is no need to try and shape or manipulate the consequences of one's actions. The urge to act in ways to minimize consequences that are seen as adverse is what motivates and, for many, justifies the actions of killing and making war. In denying the ethic of discipleship, these people are surrendering to this urge. The assumption that those who accept this ethic will be a minority and the question of how the world would look if everyone took this ethic seriously speaks directly to the main idea in this thesis.

While thinking consequentially does figure in the thinking and behavior of many people looking to others as examples of proper behavior is even more influential. In the ethic of testimony, Yoder remarks on the power of being an example:

The Christian church is to be a source of light and of savor. Not for her own glory, but to the praise of the Father, her good works are visible... our goal is to grasp its substance, especially as it has to do with enemies, power, and war. This statement that the deeds of the church are a witness is a key thought. Our deeds must be measured not only by whether they fit certain rules, nor by the results they hope to achieve, but by what they 'say'. (Yoder 41)

This idea of what our deeds or actions say to others is crucial to understanding Yoder's account of Christian pacifism. It is not enough to contemplate only one's self or group; one must consider everyone when it comes to one's actions.

What do I communicate to a man about the love of God by being willing to consider him an enemy? What do I say about personal responsibility by agreeing to consider him my enemy when it is only the hazard of birth that causes us to live under different flags? What do I say about forgiveness if I punish him for the sins of his rulers? How is it reconcilable with the gospel - good news - for the last word in my estimate of any man to be that, in a case of extreme conflict, it could be my duty to sacrifice his life for the sake of my nation, my security, or the political order which I prefer? (Yoder 41)

These questions are a challenge to answer for anyone who engages in killing and war, especially Christians. They question the motivations for finding it acceptable to kill and make war by asking what engaging in such actions says about you, your personal responsibility, and your relationship with God. These questions stress the personal example that is part of virtue ethics and sharply call into question the consequential thinking that many use to justify violence and war.

William Cavanaugh illustrates quite nicely the ethic of testimony when he writes about Stanley Hauerwas' public declaration of pacifism after having encountered Yoder's writing on the subject.

Stanley's public claim of pacifism illustrates the communal nature of virtue in the Christian community, for Stanley cannot claim peaceableness as his own native endowment. We make public commitments not to claim our own accomplishments and virtues, but to alert others to our commitments so that they can hold us to them. On our own there are few of us who can claim to have exorcised the violence within. It is therefore necessary to have a community of people committed to creating peace in order to keep each other faithful. Stanley Hauerwas declares aloud that he is a pacifist so that others will keep him from killing somebody. (Hauerwas Reader 22)

Hauerwas, in making his declaration, is saying he understands from Jesus' message that pacifism is the right way to act. Yet, knowing the right way is not enough since knowledge is not the same as acting or doing. For Hauerwas, being a pacifist goes against his natural predisposition, as he writes in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom*, "The last thing I wanted to be was a pacifist... Moreover by disposition I am not much inclined to nonviolence" (xxiv). While Hauerwas might have more inclination to violence than many others might claim, it seems likely that he is simply being more forthright in describing his nature than many would be. The key point is that testifying to his beliefs has an important effect both on his ability to live up to his ideals and on the community's response to the challenges presented by violence and war.

Another aspect of killing that Yoder deals with under the ethic of testimony is the intrinsic value of human life. This concept is very important to pacifism. But Yoder says, "The idea that human life is intrinsically sacred is not a specifically Christian thought. But the gospel itself, the message that Christ died for His enemies, is our reason for being ultimately responsible for the neighbor's - and especially the enemy's - life. We can only say this to him if we say to ourselves that we cannot dispose of him according to our own will" (Yoder 42).

If one is responsible for the life of one's enemy, then one is surely responsible for the life of one's friend or neighbor. The implicit idea is that life is valuable whether we consider the person a friend or foe, and that any such distinction is false when deliberating on their life. Yet, any justification put forward to support killing has to make just this distinction. This justification is wrong because it assumes we can make a distinction between friend and foe that makes sense. Yoder shows in this ethic of testimony that the test of whether an act is worthy of our doing it or not is in whether the act reflects who we are to God, and that we can know this by deliberating on what our potential acts say before we commit to doing them.

If the ethic of testimony shows that life is intrinsically valuable, then how is this to be understood in light of the history of the Bible, which contains many accounts of killing and war, much of which is directly ordered and inspired by God? Yoder answers this question directly in what he calls the ethic of fulfillment. Yoder starts by citing this quotation from the New Testament book of Matthew, "You have learned that our forefathers were told... But what I tell you is this" (Matthew 5:21 ff). Yoder examines the conventional interpretation of this verse below:

This has sometimes been interpreted as a rejection of the Old Testament in favor of a radically different set of demands. The Old Testament permitted hatred of the enemy - now Jesus demands that we love him. The oath, commanded then, is forbidden now. Just vengeance was required before; now it is rejected. And yet this passage opens with the promise that, "I have come not to destroy but to fulfill." (Yoder 42)

Yoder's point is that moral standards are not being abandoned just as it is implied by the earlier question, but rather that the moral standards are evolving to reach God's goal for humanity. Yoder says that Jesus, in this ethic of

fulfillment, does not reject the past but rather continues a process in progress.

Yoder writes:

The formula 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth,' in the ancient Israelite setting, actually meant a limitation placed upon vengeance. Vengeance could not be taken by the offended one or by the next of kin, but became the concern of the authorities, and was limited to the strict equivalent of the harm done. Thus even though Jesus pushes the renunciation of vengeance a powerful step further, it is in the direction set by the ancient rules. (Yoder 44)

Yoder sees the real contrast with Jesus' meaning of the ethic of fulfillment not with the Old Testament but rather with the interpretation of what is meant by "fulfillment."

Yoder finds three features that characterize this flawed understanding of the concept of fulfillment. The first is that it makes its standards achievable without serious challenge to the status quo, which means compromise is necessary. This corresponds to the realism discussed earlier in this chapter. This flawed understanding compromises our morals by tailoring them to those things we think are possible to reach. Yoder states,

I can perhaps refrain from killing and from adultery if I may still cherish lustful and hateful thoughts. Thus we still seek to tailor our morals to fit our means, so that we can keep the rules and justify ourselves thereby. The logical circle is vicious. We want to be able to justify ourselves by what we can do; so we set our goals within reach. We construct ourselves a manageable morality, which we can handle without repentance. (Yoder 45)

We want to do what we want to do and still feel good about it by justifying it. It is significant that Yoder acknowledges our desire to be "right" and to do what we want to do without repentance. By not wanting to repent we are effectively working to stay the same internally, or closing our minds to being different.

This leads to the second flaw Yoder cites, which

is that it is external, accessible. We get it out on the surface where we can prescribe and proscribe specific acts as right and wrong. We cannot tell if the heart is pure, but we can identify murder and adultery. We cannot make a man

love one wife for life, but we can insist that the divorce proceedings be legal. Legitimacy replaces love as the standard. (Yoder 45-6)

Notice the language here concentrates on how we can view others. It is about judging others and not about internal fulfillment. This is the same legalism that led to Yoder's criticism of the "a Sermon-on-the-Mount ethic" (34). This language also points to the shift from a minority religious group concerned with the personal to an institution concerned with management of social and political issues.

The third characteristic takes this theme even further.

Implied in the outwardness and fulfillability is a third characteristic. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees assumes a reasonable degree of legitimate self-interest. It can ask self-discipline but not self-denial; temperance or moderation, but not asceticism; it can ask us to bear a yoke but not a cross. And so it is today: the limits of moral rigor lie at the point of survival - national or personal. Do not lie - except to save your life or your country. Do not kill - except killers. Do not save yourself unless others depend on you. (Yoder 46)

The underlying assumption is that God will only ask of us what is reasonable. Extreme views deny God exists at all, but more common views and the one Yoder delineate is the view that God will not ask of us what is unreasonable. This leaves what is reasonable for us to decide. As in many things, if one has a vested interest in deciding an issue in one way instead of another, that interest will in many, if not most, cases carry the determination. The conclusion is that if we are deciding what is reasonable then it will surely please us; of that we can be certain.

The idea expressed within the ethic of testimony is that life is intrinsically valuable. A similar idea is also at work within the ethic of perfect love in that any justification that would allow us to kill cannot morally distinguish between enemies or friends. Like our inability to distinguish in any significant way between friends and foes, we cannot justify loving only our friends and excluding

our enemies. In the earlier example of killing, many people miss the point and append importance to superficial meanings. The feature of perfection captures many people's attention. They use this as evidence that the standard or example is set too high for any but the most devoted of saints. Yoder brings our attention to this misunderstanding by pointing out,

Jesus is saying that we should not love only our friends because God did not love only His friends. ...We are asked to 'resemble God' just at this one point: not in His omnipotence or His eternity or His impeccability, but simply in the indiscriminating or unconditional character of His love. This is not a fruit of long growth and maturation; it is not inconceivable or impossible. We can do it tomorrow if we believe. We can stop loving only the lovable, lending only to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionality of the benevolence of God. 'There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.' (Yoder 47)

The ethic of perfect love directly supports Christian pacifism because it calls for everyone to look upon each other as God does and not through limited personal perspectives. These personal perspectives are what most people typically consider reasonable and therefore are generally some calculation of cost and benefit. From this personal perspective we say, "I prefer the life of those nearest me to that of the foreigner; or the life of the innocent to that of the troublemaker, because - naturally, as everyone else does - my love is conditional, qualified, natural" (Yoder 48). Yet, while this may be the normal way of preserving one's life, this is exactly the problem with this path. This way of thinking assumes preserving one's life is one's highest duty. Yoder would disagree with this assumption. Yoder writes, "Not only is 'perfect love' not limited to those who merit it; it even goes beyond the unjust demands of those who coerce compliance with their will. 'Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also' (Mt. 5:39, RSV)" (Yoder 48).

Perfect love is at the heart of Christian pacifism and is the origin of the label “nonresistance” which, Yoder says, “is stronger and more precise than 'nonviolence'; for one can hate or despise, conquer and crush another without the use of outward violence. But the term is confusing as well. It has been interpreted - by those who reject the idea - to mean a weak acceptance of the intentions of the evil one, resignation to his evil goals” (48). Yoder denies the text requires the acceptance of evil intentions. He holds, “The 'resistance' which we renounce is a response in kind, returning evil for evil. But the alternative is not complicity in his designs. The alternative is creative concern for the person who is bent on evil, coupled with the refusal of his goals” (Yoder 48).

It is important to note the language Yoder uses when he writes “the person who is bent on evil” (Yoder 48), because this characterizes the person as wanting to behave in an evil way but not as necessarily evil in itself. Contrast this with the all too common way of characterizing persons we are opposing as evil, which implies there is no hope for them. This way of contemplating another can be a first step in dehumanizing them to the point where killing is justified. It is a way of distinguishing between good and bad behavior that supports extreme measures like killing. But, this is the type of thinking that is in conflict with pacifism, and represents the realism of our earlier discussion. Yoder’s final word on the ethic of perfect love is to contrast old thinking like this with the new thinking embodied by this ethic. He writes, “What in the old covenant was a limit on vengeance - for one eye, only one eye - has now become a special measure of love demanded by concern for the redemption of the offender. This is 'perfect love'... ” (Yoder 49).

If the meaning of the ethic of perfect love is to love to excess, then this leads to the sixth of seven ethics, the ethic of excess. Yoder thinks the common way to think about ethics is to compare oneself to others to measure up to the average or the average expectation. But here Yoder holds, "It is the excess, the going beyond what could be expected, the setting aside what one would have a right to, which is itself the norm. The point is rather that it is of the nature of the love of God not to let itself be limited by models or options or opportunities which are offered it by a situation" (Yoder 49). Yoder's point is that situations inherently contain limitations that need to be transcended and that this is the proper model. He points out, "It does more because the very event of exceeding the available models is itself a measure of its character," and, "Far from asking as a certain contemporary style of ethics would, 'What options does the situation give me?'" or even more superficially, "What action does the situation demand?" Jesus would ask, "How in this situation will the life-giving power of the Spirit reach beyond available models and options to do a new thing whose very newness will be a witness to divine presence?" (Yoder 49)

The idea is to exceed the limitations of the situation, not to accede to them and effectively to accord to them controlling authority. The circumstances do not, as many ethical theories assume, indicate the significant edges or form of the shape of the relevant ethical justifications. Yoder holds that the idea Jesus is expressing in this ethic is drawing on the power of the example one can be to act in the way God wants action to be taken, and not act from the perspective that a person *thinks* she or he ought to when deliberating on the circumstances of the

situation. Yoder says Jesus is calling for us to transcend our perspective and use God's perspective instead.

The final ethic is the ethic of reconciliation. This ethic speaks to the internal state of the person: "Jesus fulfills [in] the meaning of 'Thou shall not kill' by moving to the level of personal intention.... The most serious hatred is seen not in the act but in the inner attitude toward the brother" (50). The concept of intention is a popular one among moral philosophers, and it does not take much thought to see why. Intention may justify acts that when judged solely on the acts themselves "appear" wrong or evil. Elucidating that the agent had or internally held a good intention to do good by the act, so cannot be held responsible if the act turns out to create evil is a primary use of the concept. Yoder puts it this way: "In their thought, the idea is that if one's desire is that good may come of one's acts, or if one wishes to honor God, or if one is unselfish, then any action, including killing, can be right" (50).

The problem with using intention in this way is analogous to the earlier discussion of using human definitions of reasonableness instead of God's definition. The issue is how can one decide for oneself without bias. This is something that is difficult for almost everyone. Yoder says in the ethic of reconciliation that, "the key 'intention' is measured by the brother. One cannot even worship God, the text goes on to say, without being reconciled to the brother" (Yoder 50-1). The idea is to have one person judge for another what their intention is, thereby eliminating the powerful influence one has to protect and support one's own life and position. Yet for this to work, the relationship

with the other person has to be good and reconciled. Yoder says we can see this expressed very ardently when,

Jesus does not contrast the prohibition of killing on one hand and the life of neighbor on the other, so that for the sake of the principle of neighbor love one could kill. Jesus rather fulfills the intent of the prohibition of killing by centering it - not, as in Genesis 9, in the ritual of blood, nor, as in humanist philosophy, in the absolute value of the person; but in the fellowship between man and man, as a mirror and as means of fellowship with God. (Yoder 50-1)

In these seven ethics of the new community that Jesus creates, there is powerful support for the concept of pacifism and nonresistance to violence. These ethics are mutually reinforcing and strengthening. A major theme is the mistake many make in substituting their own or human judgment for God's expressed will. Another theme speaks to the ego-driven nature of human ethical decision-making. Yoder points out the many ways that Jesus' message is compromised by efforts to justify both personal and societal desires.

Evaluation of Yoder's Methodology and Interpretation

Yoder provides an explanation of Jesus' message that incorporates what is known about the history of Jesus' time and place. This approach lends credibility to Yoder's interpretation since many of his assertions about that time and place are deducible from other sources. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, Yoder holds that the human condition or the nature of humanity is not different today than in Jesus' time. This is an important concept since without it Jesus' message would not necessarily apply to people today.

Yoder's point that the underlying social and political conditions supporting the issues faced by Jesus are the same as those of today rings true because these are the same choices facing us today. The controversy over the

justifications for waging war in Iraq is one example of this. Some say the war is a war for freedom but others point out the influential economic and political interests that seem to play an important role in the decision for war. There are also many examples in the intervening history between Jesus' time and the present day that testify to this recurring theme. There is also a stark logic to Yoder's analysis of the choices facing Jesus. Jesus could have resigned himself to the situation (realism), or taken up arms and fought (righteous religious violence,) or attempted to maintain "proper religion." The final choice would be to have withdrawn from society. The completeness of Yoder's interpretation creates believability by first by covering all the logical choices and then by giving examples from Jesus' time. These examples compound the effect by reinforcing Yoder's assertions that Jesus' message is timeless and helping to show Yoder's interpretation is valid.

Yoder employs another strategy that serves to confirm his interpretation. Yoder reminds his audience that Jesus' message is not a completely novel message; rather it is a continuation of a message that God has been communicating to humanity for a long time. By explaining the historical and religious context that Jesus drew upon, Yoder both clarifies Jesus' message and articulates a powerful reason to believe both Jesus and his own interpretation. Yoder does this by showing how God was leading Abraham to a new land to live in a new way. Yoder makes a convincing argument that this message is the same message as the "Good News" message of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Yoder makes another compelling argument when he examines the ethics that support war and violence. Yoder confirms that the ethics that form most of

Christian thought is virtue ethics with Jesus as the main exemplar. Yet, as usual Yoder does more than simply state one should follow or be like Jesus. He explains in detail many of the key ethical ideas he finds within Jesus' "Good News" message. These include the ethics of repentance, discipleship, and testimony. The difficulty with virtue ethics is that it generally lacks a way for a person reliably to reason what behavior is correct in specific situations. While developing character within the auspices of virtue ethics is still difficult and error prone, Yoder provides more guidance than most commentators. Being explicit at this point is valuable to Yoder's argument. It is valuable since it adds credibility to his interpretation generally. It does this by giving compelling evidence of why Jesus would act in the way Yoder says he did. Yoder explains the underlying ethics of the situation that is cogent with the actions Jesus chose.

Conclusion

Yoder's analysis of Jesus' "Good News" message is thoughtful and thought provoking. His analysis is thoughtful in that he strives for the most straightforward understanding that is supported by the biblical text but always maintains that the message ought to have relevance for today's Christians. In this way he opens up new paths to understanding and clears away old interpretations. Yet, by showing how older interpretations are biased toward a particular outcome, Yoder gives everyone good reasons to re-evaluate the conventional interpretation of Jesus' message.

The import of Yoder's interpretation is clear; war is not supportable. It is not supportable though a reasonable reading of Jesus' message and example and

it is not supportable though a rational extrapolation of Jesus' example. Pro-war interpretations represent decisions based on political expediency, and therefore represent a corruption of the original message contained within the "Good News" message.

Yoder does not make a simple declaration of his findings. This conclusion is not something he comes to without consideration and study, which he believes is open to all. Yoder explains his reasoning by elaborating on the ethics he sees within both Jesus' example and the Good News message. The seven ethics that he details, which include the ethics of repentance, testimony, and perfect love, and the lesser known ethics of fulfillment, excess, discipleship, and reconciliation, portray a much more complicated situation than many people might think is the case. This assertion is clear when one realizes that some of the ethics he lists are very familiar while others are not. Yoder makes clear the situation is more complex than it is generally conceived to be.

The complexity of these ethics supports the establishment of an equally complex entity: a new kind of community. Communities are by their construction and function complex to begin with, but Yoder says the kind of community Jesus created is fundamentally different than any community before it. This community was not based on the usual circumstances and traditions. It was a community created by choice where the interaction between its members was not based on traditional values. Circumstances including differences in race, religion, and class were not seen as important while before they were considered definitive. What was once *the* reason for separation was no longer important and not seen as a good reason to be exclusionary. What mattered in this new

community was taking care of the poor and sharing leadership, not responding with violence. This new dynamic of human interaction was enabled by these seven ethics that Yoder details.

Yoder rests his assertions on these seven ethics on the example of Jesus' life and the content of his Good News message. Yoder finds, as many have, a rich field of examples from which to harvest a bounty of principles and lessons from the example of Jesus' life. Confirming the idea that nothing of substance has changed over the centuries in the nature of humanity, Yoder cites the social pressures that Jesus experienced and his response to them as still relevant to humanity. The choices Jesus was faced with, which Yoder asserts still face us today include realism, righteous religious violence, withdrawal from society, and "proper religion." Yoder contextualizes Jesus' experience to develop these possible responses and then examines their implications.

Within this framework of social pressures and possible responses, Yoder interprets the Good News message. This message is not something entirely new with Jesus but, as Yoder points out, is a continuation of a message that God has been sending for a long time. The Good News message heralds the kind of radical change that God wants humanity to adopt. These include changes in both personal attitudes and social practices. Yoder sees the Good News message as a prescription from God to humanity on how to be more like God. It is a message that shows how God is and reveals that the intention is for humanity to act as God acts.

In this chapter I have explained how Yoder sees the Good News message heralded by Jesus as being a continuation of a larger message from God. I have

examined both Yoder's interpretation of this message and the methodology he uses. I have shown how pacifism flows out of Yoder's interpretation of Good News message. For Yoder pacifism and nonviolence are not some idealistic philosophies justified because they are the "right" things to do, but because that is the way God is and wants us to be.

Chapter 3. Gandhi's Conception of *Satyagraha*

The Twentieth Century produced no leader, religious or otherwise, who was more devoted to fighting violence and war than Mohandas Gandhi. First in South Africa and then later in his native India, Gandhi used his “experiments in Truth” and his study of Hinduism and other religions to develop his concept of *satyagraha*. In English, *satyagraha* is translated as civil disobedience. Yet, this only captures some of its political and moral dimensions, and it manages only to hint at some of the possible aspects of the nonviolence and pacifism that is integral to Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha*. In this chapter, I explore Gandhi's conception of pacifism by investigating his concept of *satyagraha*.

An Overview of Gandhi's Argument

Gandhi is, in many ways, surprising. He is surprising because he challenges notions of how religious persons can reason about their religion and about what they can do in light of it in confronting injustice. It is possible that these notions and the surprise that I feel are limited to me, but I do not think so. Gandhi is also surprising because of his uniqueness. There are been very few people who have the depth of intellect to understand the subtleties and complexities of violent human interaction and simultaneously possess the character to act on their intellectual realization. This makes Gandhi something of an enigma, and enigmas, especially when they are persons, are always surprising. Yet appreciating him and the contributions he makes in addressing some of the

really *hard* problems of life is not limited to the complexity and sophistication of his thoughts and reasoning, but extends to other attributes like honesty, bravery, and the willingness to sacrifice. My goal in presenting this material is to provide the reader with a better understanding and appreciation of Gandhi's thoughts on religion and the confrontation of injustice, especially his ideas on nonviolence and pacifism.

Gandhi bases his nonviolent argument on his unique interpretation the story of Arjuna as recounted in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in at least three important ways. To appreciate and understand his reasoning requires a basic understanding of this very influential Hindu text, so this chapter begins with an exegesis of the story of Arjuna from the *Bhagavad Gita* and its traditional interpretation.

Gandhi identifies and singles out three concepts from this story as especially important. They figure prominently in his thinking on the problems of violence and war. These are that action is required and that *right* action involves both sacrifice and yet is without attachment. While recognizing these concepts within the *Bhagavad Gita* might be clear-cut, other aspects of Gandhi's interpretation are not. The prominence of these concepts to Gandhi's arguments dictates we explore them. Of these, action is the axis around which the other two revolve, so much of what follows is an elucidation of what is required and entailed by proper action. Gandhi uses these ideas to develop *satyagraha*, his primary response to the most intractable of all problems and situations.

Satyagraha is a radical approach that does not advocate responding with violence; rather it stresses accepting any violence that might be directed at its adherents, which Gandhi calls *satyagrahis*. *Satyagraha* is particularly suited to

address political conflicts involving violence, namely, war, but is not limited to this. Understanding *satyagraha* requires understanding Gandhi's unique interpretation of the *Gita*, which requires that we first examine the traditional understanding of the Arjuna story from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The Traditional Interpretation of the story of Arjuna

The *Bhagavad Gita* (or simply the *Gita*) is revered by almost all Hindus and is part of a much larger work called the *Mahabharata*. While Hinduism does not have any one definitive sacred text there is a universal appeal to the *Gita* among Hindus. The *Gita* was not written by one author but is compiled over time. The relevant part of the story concerns a dilemma between competing duties. Caste governed life in India at the time of the *Gita* (~200 BCE – 200 CE). The caste system provided everyone with a framework for his life's work or *dharma*, and everyone was required to stay within its precepts. This story revolves around Arjuna, who is a member of the warrior caste, *ksatriyas*. Arjuna's dilemma is that as a warrior he must kill and harm others, but, when these duties require him to harm and kill members of his own family and friends, he balks. Arjuna is faced with a circumstance in which the duties to protect and serve his family and to perform his role as a warrior are mutually exclusive.

Arjuna's dilemma is that whichever duty he chooses will cause him to violate the other duty. This crisis would be devastating to anyone, and it is especially true for Arjuna as he is faced with the situation immediately before a battle. He asks his closest advisor his Charioteer Krishna for counsel. While answering his request for counsel Krishna also reveals to Arjuna that he is an

avatar or earthly embodiment of Vishnu (a central deity of Hinduism.) Krishna tells Arjuna not to worry about things that are not properly his concern but this answer does not resolve Arjuna's dilemma. Arjuna does not wish to kill those he is obligated to protect, but Krishna tells him, "The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. Nor at any time verily was I not, nor thou, nor these princes of men, nor verily shall we ever cease to be, hereafter." By this Krishna means that living or dying is not the final end of a person's life that it seems to be, so Krishna tells Arjuna to attend to his duty and "fight" (Ballou 60).

In this despairing situation, Arjuna can make no sense of Krishna's words and he asks Krishna for more help in understanding. Krishna says Arjuna must act and that action is superior to inaction. As Krishna says, "But who, controlling the senses by the mind, O Arjuna, with the organs of action without attachment, performeth yoga by action, he is worthy. Perform thou right action, for action is superior to inaction" (Ballou 61). Action then is not only required but is also inevitable, so the only question is which path represents the right or correct action. Krishna gives Arjuna a way to determine which action is right when he says, "The world is bound by action, unless performed for the sake of sacrifice; for that sake, free from attachment, O son of Kunti, perform thou action" (Ballou 62). The right action is the action done for the sake of sacrifice and without attachment.

In Arjuna's situation either of the choices of action involves sacrifice: either he sacrifices his general duty to protect and support his family, or he abandons his specific duty to his caste to perform the duties of a warrior. The

final sacrifice Arjuna needs to make is his attachment to the “fruits of action.”

Krishna guides Arjuna by saying,

Whose works are all free from the moulding of desire, whose actions are burned up by the fire of wisdom, him the wise have called a sage. Having abandoned attachment to the fruit of action, always content, nowhere seeking refuge, he is not doing anything, although doing actions. (Ballou 63)

If Arjuna decided to choose his family, he would be acting with attachment since he surely desires and wants his family to be safe. The only choice that meets the intertwined requirements of sacrifice and non-attachment is to choose caste over family, and fight. This, at least, is the traditional reading of the text.

A Framework for *Satyagraha*: Gandhi’s Unique Interpretation of the Arjuna Story

There are many challenges to Gandhi’s position on nonviolence in this traditional reading of the story of Arjuna. The most obvious is that, in the story of Arjuna, there is nothing said about war or killing being generally wrong. Gandhi concedes:

I have admitted in my introduction to the *Gita* known as Anasakti Yoga that it is not a treatise on non-violence, nor was it written to condemn war. Hinduism, as it is practiced today or has even been known to have ever been practised, has certainly not condemned war as I do. (Duncan 40)

How, then, can Gandhi find a ground for his nonviolent and pacifist conception of *satyagraha* in the *Gita*? The answer lies in Gandhi’s unique interpretation of the *Gita*. Gandhi points out that, while the setting of story of the *Gita* is during a war, the subject under discussion is only indirectly about war. As Gandhi elaborates,

In this great work the *Gita* is the crown. Its second chapter, instead of teaching the rules of physical warfare, tells us how a perfected man is to be known. In the characteristics of the perfected man of the *Gita* I do not see any to correspond to physical warfare. Its

whole design is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between warring parties. (Duncan 33)

Gandhi's point is that the *Gita* is only superficially about war, that the story is set during war but that war is not the point. Still, even if the *Gita* only indirectly uses war as an illustration, it is difficult to see how Gandhi finds support for nonviolence out of this clear and unambiguous message.

The answer to this paradox lies in two areas: the concept of *ahimsa* and Gandhi's own experience. *Ahimsa* is an idea that predates the *Gita* and means truth and love, while its opposite, *himsa*, means untruth and violence.² Gandhi expresses it like this,

I have felt that in trying to enforce in one's life the central teaching of the *Gita*, one is bound to follow Truth and *ahimsa*. When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Take any instance of untruth or violence, and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end. But it may be freely admitted that the *Gita* was not written to establish *ahimsa*. It was an accepted and primary duty even before the *Gita* age. (Duncan 37)

In this statement, Gandhi makes the point that reading a religious text is not a backward-oriented exercise where everything necessary to understanding the text is included within the text. To properly understand a religious text requires that one understands what the author took her or his audience to understand.

Gandhi's point is that understanding *ahimsa* is integral to understanding the *Gita* and that the author of the *Gita* expected his audience to know and to practice the concept of *ahimsa*.

Gandhi cites another analogous problem with understanding the *Gita* as supporting violence and war. He says there is a contradiction between war and

² For a detailed analysis of *ahimsa* and *himsa* see Unto Tähitnen's book, *AHIMSĀ: Non-Violence in Indian Tradition*. (1976). London, Rider and Company.

ahimsa. "When the *Gita* was written, although people believed in *ahimsa*, wars were not only not taboo, but nobody observed the contradiction between them and *ahimsa*" (Duncan 37). Additionally, the *Gita*, instead of supporting war, portrays the futility of war and the warriors as achieving nothing worthy. As Gandhi says, "He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries" (Duncan 33). Gandhi points out that the author of the *Gita* uses war to get his point across to his audience.

Gandhi writes,

When I first became acquainted with the *Gita*, I felt that it was not an historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal dual more alluring. (Duncan 33)

Yet, it does seem some of the ideas in the *Gita* do not directly preclude war.

Gandhi agrees that this is the case and elucidates,

Let it be granted, that according to the letter of the *Gita* it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years' unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the *Gita* in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *ahimsa* in every shape and form. (Duncan 38)

Gandhi shows how he integrates his "experiments in Truth" by using his experience to interpret the religious aspects of the Arjuna's story in the *Gita*.

Gandhi asserts the impossibility of living the contradiction of allowing war and violence while successfully seeking *ahimsa*.

Gandhi's interpretations of the *Gita* and his conclusions he draws from it are counterintuitive but are justified by his interpretation and understanding of the *Gita* through his study and experience. Gandhi believes that religion is not static but is subject to evolution by its practitioners. Logically, then it is not surprising that Gandhi would believe that his own sense of God and Hinduism

profits by the study of other religions. This adoption of some religious ideas from outside the tradition is a common Hindu expression of religious spirituality. As Gandhi writes,

I have endeavoured, in the light of a prayerful study of the other faiths of the world, and what is more, in light of my own experiences in trying to live the teaching of Hinduism as interpreted in the *Gita*, to give an extended but in no way strained meaning to Hinduism, not as buried in its ample scriptures, but as a living faith speaking like a mother to her aching child. What I have done is perfectly historical. I have followed in the footsteps of our forefathers. (Duncan 40)

The interpretation Gandhi offers of the *Gita* may be new, but it is not unprecedented in Hinduism. As Gandhi points out,

At one time they sacrificed animals to propitiate angry gods. Their descendants, but our less remote ancestors, read a different meaning into the word 'sacrifice', and they taught that sacrifice was meant to be of our baser self, to please not angry gods but the one living God within. I hold that the logical outcome of the teaching of the *Gita* is decidedly for peace at the price of life itself. It is the highest aspiration of the human species. (Duncan 40-1)

Gandhi is doing what Hindus have always done: seeking God through the study of religious texts and using his personal experiences of trying to live the message he finds. As Gandhi writes,

What, however, I have done is to put a new but natural and logical interpretation upon the whole teaching of the *Gita* and the spirit of Hinduism. Hinduism, not to speak of other religions, is ever evolving. It has no one scripture like the Koran or the Bible. Its scriptures are also evolving and suffering addition. (Duncan 40)

Gandhi is contributing to the evolution of the Hindu tradition using traditional methods and approaches. His counterintuitive interpretation of the *Gita* only seems counterintuitive because it challenges the prevailing interpretation, which may suffer from superficiality and dogmatisms. According to Gandhi, his leavening of the story of the *Gita* with his own experience renders an invigorated version that expresses the essence of Hinduism while simultaneously disturbing the status quo much in the same way as the practice of sacrifice must have been

unsettled when its meaning changed and evolved. Gandhi conceives of the *Gita* as a great religious poem that is accessible to everyone, and that simultaneously provides both a source of new meanings and a timeless central message.

Constructing *Satyagraha*: Action, Nonattachment, and Sacrifice

To summarize, Gandhi asserts there are three clear points in the story of Arjuna that are especially important: first, action is required; second, *right* action involves a sacrifice; and third, right action is without attachment. Gandhi returns to these themes again and again. To clarify these concepts I have organized them as action, sacrifice, and nonattachment. These concepts are especially important to understanding Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha*. Action is the central idea that nonattachment and sacrifice revolve around and are intertwined, so we begin with it.

Action is simultaneously the most powerful and intuitive of these concepts and the most commonly misunderstood. This is especially true when contemplating the common belief that passivity is a significant aspect of pacifism. Gandhi rejects the idea that inaction is acceptable, and he writes that action is essential: "To tread the path of truth implies an active life in the world. In the absence of such activity, there is no occasion for either pursuing or swerving from truth. The *Gita* has made it clear that a person cannot remain inactive even for a single moment" (Dear 85). As Krishna teaches Arjuna, one cannot be seeking Truth or *ahimsa* without action because without action there would be neither motion to or from God, so without action one would not be seeking God.

Gandhi understands that the *Gita* describes how to become like God, and that action is essential to the success of the process. As Gandhi elucidates, "Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavour to reach this state is the supreme, the only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*, as it is of all scriptures" (Duncan 34). The *Gita* portrays Krishna as being "perfection and right knowledge personified" (Duncan 33), so Krishna even as an *avatar* is an example of someone that has achieved self-realization. From this Gandhi concludes, "The object of the *Gita* appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization" (Duncan 34).

Yet, there is a problem with action. All action necessarily involves the body, which because of bodily desires taints every action. Gandhi explains the problem this way,

The body has been likened to a prison. There must be action where there is body. Not one embodied being is exempted from labour. And yet all religions proclaim that it is possible for man, by treating the body as the temple of God, to attain freedom. Every action is tainted, be it ever so trivial. How can the body be made the temple of God? In other words how can one be free from action, i.e. from the taint of sin? (Duncan 34)

Gandhi says the *Gita* provides the remedy, which is the "renunciation of fruits of action" (Duncan 34). Intertwined in this renunciation are the elements of nonattachment and sacrifice. Gandhi feels the way the *Gita* solves this problem is unique and unmistakable (Duncan 36). He is equally clear when he declares, "The *Gita* has answered the question in decisive language: 'By desireless action; by renouncing fruits of action; by dedicating all activities to God, i.e. by surrendering oneself to Him body and soul'" (Duncan 34). The result is just as

simple, “He who give up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises” (Duncan 36).

Gandhi is careful to clarify what he means by action, "Here all activity, whether mental or physical, is to be included in the term action," to include every action, and that the renunciation of fruit does not mean indifference to the result (Duncan 36). As he carefully explains,

But renunciation of fruit in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it. He, who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him, is said to have renounced the fruits of his actions. (Duncan 36)

In this key passage, Gandhi makes an astute observation about human action. Generally, many people will only undertake an action because of their desire for a certain result. For these people, severing this desire from the action means the action loses much of its original point. In what is reminiscent of some Buddhist approaches, Gandhi clarifies that this desire for a particular result is not required, nor even permissible. What is required is that an attitude of non-attachment is established and maintained. He points out that the knowledge of the expectation of the result, plus the means and capacity to achieve the result, are all that is required.

By making this concept distinct, Gandhi says that the *Gita* dispels a common misbelief that religion is always opposed to the material world and that its only function is for spiritual pursuits (Duncan 37). Gandhi says that the *Gita* “has shown that religion must rule even our worldly pursuits. I have felt that the *Gita* teaches us that what cannot be followed out in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion. Thus, according to the *Gita*, all acts that are incapable of being

performed without attachment are taboo" (Duncan 37). This is an important consideration for those studying Gandhi's life and works since undoubtedly it is central to his approach.

The willingness to sacrifice is also a required part of Gandhi's re-conception of the *Gita*. Just as Arjuna's situation entailed his sacrificing something important and dear to him, so too Gandhi sees that willingness to suffer is required. He writes, "*Satyagraha* means fighting injustice by voluntarily submitting oneself to suffering," and "*Satyagrahis*, on the contrary, fight by suffering themselves. The greater the suffering that *satyagrahis* go through, the purer they become" (Dear 91).

Suffering injury in one's own person is of the essence of non-violence and is the chosen substitute for violence to others. It is not because I value life that I countenance with for thousands voluntarily losing their lives in *satyagraha*, but because I know that it results, in the long run, in the least loss of life and, what is more, it ennoble those who lose their lives and morally enriches the world for their sacrifice. (Dear 93)

Suffering, in this conception, is not something that any sane person avoids but is something specifically chosen as the best way to deal with the violence of others. It is an integral part of Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha* and comes directly from his interpretation of the *Gita*.

Countering the common understanding that pacifism is inherently passive, through Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita* we see that action is essential. Yet, the action that Gandhi espouses is not action in the conventional sense. If one uses the conventional sense of the meaning of action, then one would underestimate the commitment Gandhi is demanding. This is a level of commitment that would make any soldier wince at the thought of following through with its requirements. These commitments include the prescription that

one is supposed to be active (engaging in actions) but not concerned with any personal reward or the fulfillment of any desire; in addition, one must maintain awareness of the result, while always also maintaining non-attachment.

Anyone engaging in *satyagraha* can expect to suffer from his or her actions. This suffering is not one potential result among many possibilities but a certainty. Suffering and sacrifice are central and powerful parts of *satyagraha*, and they are required of every practitioner. As Gandhi notes,

To lay down our life, even alone, for what we consider to be right, is the very core of *satyagraha*. More no one can do. If we are armed with a sword, we might lop off a few heads, but ultimately we must surrender to superior force or else die fighting. The sword of the *satyagrahi* is love and the unshakable firmness that comes from it. Satyagrahis will regard as brothers and sisters the hundreds of rioters that confront them, and instead of trying to kill them, they will choose to die at their hands and thereby live. (Dear 93)

This is far beyond the commitment normally asked of anyone, even a soldier in wartime. At least in most armies, soldiers are never ordered to die instead of capitulating. Usually, a soldier's training or orders include at least implicitly the thinking that, absent an effective way to press the war and faced with certain death, it is preferable to avoid death so that he or she may rejoin the fight at some future date. The action Gandhi frames, as part of *satyagraha*, would be challenging for anyone.

Satyagraha: A Model for Social and Political Action

Satyagraha is designed to address difficult and intractable situations and problems, so it is not surprising that it is itself a challenging philosophy. Gandhi coined the term *satyagraha* in 1908 while in South Africa. He did so partly to distinguish it from the Passive Resistance movement then active in the United Kingdom. Gandhi says *satyagraha* is very different than this Passive

Resistance movement, which “is conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence,” while *satyagraha* is “conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any shape or form” (Duncan 65). From the beginning Gandhi is clear about the all-important differences between *satyagraha* and other apparently analogous efforts.

Truth is simultaneously the most basic and important feature of *satyagraha*. As Gandhi says, “The word ‘*Satya*’ (Truth) is derived from ‘*Sat*’ which means being. And nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why ‘*Sat*’ or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God” (Duncan 41). Gandhi believes that Truth is the key to everything, and everything flows from it.

Truth is the sole reason for our existence. All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life. When once this stage in the pilgrim's progress is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without effort, and obedience to them will be instinctive. But without Truth it would be impossible to observe any principles or rules in life. (Duncan 41)

Yet, there is one thing necessary to seek Truth. Gandhi says, “The brave are those armed with fearlessness, not with the sword, the rifle and other carnal weapons, which, strictly speaking are affected only by cowards” (Duncan 44). Fearlessness is essential because it “connotes freedom from all external fear-- fear of disease, bodily injury and death, of dispossession, of losing one's nearest and dearest, of losing reputation or giving offense, and so on” (Duncan 44). Without this fearlessness, the search for truth will always be thwarted. But, how are we to be rid of fear? Gandhi draws upon the *Gita* in providing guidance: “All fears revolve round the body as the centre, and would therefore disappear, as soon as one got rid of attachment for the body” (Duncan 44).

Fearlessness or bravery is only important if action is contemplated or undertaken. If one is consumed by the fear of what might happen to one's body, then this desire to avoid all deleterious outcomes will shape every aspect of one's actions or responses. Considerations of this nature are particularly expected and understandable. Self-preservation is such a strong aspect of everyone's character that we generally think someone who does not exhibit it is disturbed in some real and dangerous way. Likewise, approaching a situation where one might be the subject of a violent act almost guarantees most people will either fight back or attempt to avoid the confrontation. The task Gandhi sets out to understand and prepare for is a difficult one to say the least. To call it counterintuitive is the mildest way to delineate what he asks, but the task would be impossible without the preparation Gandhi proposes.

Gandhi derives his conception of *satyagraha* from his interpretation of the *Gita*. He takes the basic lessons of the importance of action, nonattachment and sacrifice and explains their significance and role in *satyagraha*. The connection to Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gita* is direct and unmistakable.

While Gandhi may be right about the simplicity of *satyagraha*, it is not an easy or a simple-to-practice philosophy. The political aspect of *satyagraha* is just as challenging. One English translation of *satyagraha* is civil disobedience. Yet, what does Gandhi mean by the political aspects of this term? Gandhi's answer is, "On the political field, the struggle on behalf of the people mostly consists in opposing error in the shape of unjust laws" (Duncan 65). Under this conception, an unjust law is a law in error. It is in error because it does not serve the people but supports injustice instead. For Gandhi this is a misuse of the

power of government. Gandhi believes in government and does not believe in going outside its normal processes of addressing or changing the laws, but he is not above doing this if there is no other way.

When you have failed to bring the error home to the law-giver by way of petitions and the like, the only remedy open to you, if you do not wish to submit to error, is to compel him by physical force to yield to you or by suffering in your own person by inviting the penalty for the breach of the law. (Duncan 65)

The reference to using physical force is not something Gandhi advocates but rather adverts to the right of the people to force or overthrow an unjust government. Here is another example of inviting suffering to address injustice.

Usually breaking the law is a criminal act, but Gandhi claims civil disobedience is not criminal. Gandhi asserts the breaking of unjust laws is very different than criminally breaking laws. As he writes,

The law-breaker breaks the law surreptitiously and tries to avoid the penalty, not so the civil resister. He ever obeys the laws of the state to which he belongs, not out of fear of the sanctions, but because he considers them to be good for the welfare of society. But there are occasions, generally rare, when he considers certain laws to be so unjust as to render obedience to them a dishonour. He then openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach. (Duncan 66)

This should look familiar for students of the 1960's civil rights actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. King studied Gandhi's methods and asserted some of these same arguments in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," written while he was imprisoned in 1963 for violating what he felt was an unjust court directive not to march. Voluntarily capitulating to the punishment of breaking an unjust law is a powerful way of bringing attention to the issue. Resisting in this way is especially effective when famous persons and large groups of people undertake it. Both Gandhi and King used it to great effect.

Not surprisingly, engaging in action that is sure to draw punishment is not something to undertake lightly. Civil disobedience invites suffering, but

unlike using violence, it brings suffering onto oneself, not on others. As Gandhi declares, "*Satyagraha* means fighting injustice by voluntarily submitting oneself to suffering," and "*Satyagraha* is not a way of fighting to which one can resort unless one has a real grievance" (Dear 91). This submission to violence has its critics. In his book, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer writes, "The success of nonviolent resistance requires that soldiers (or their officers or political leaders) refuse at some early point, before civilian endurance is exhausted, to carry out or support a terrorist policy" (332). Walzer is making the point that Gandhi's success had much to do with the British with whom he was in conflict with at the time over Indian self-rule. I think Gandhi would agree, but only enough to say that the character of those in opposition serves to either lengthen or abridge the conflict and that his method and philosophy would eventually overcome this challenge.

Walzer thinks that, sometimes, if an invading army did adopt terrorist tactics then the country would "grow silent," meaning the opposition would be silenced by the terrorism of the invading army (332); Gandhi would disagree. Richard Norman also says there are limits to what nonviolence can accomplish. Norman writes in his book, *Ethics, Killing and War*,

There are obvious limits. People may sit down in front of tanks, as they did in Czechoslovakia, but a military advance cannot be halted non-violently if its commanders are sufficiently ruthless – if they are prepared to massacre those who obstruct them, for instance, as the Chinese authorities did in Tienanmen Square in 1989. (210)

This comment seems to make the mistake of equating military tactics with nonviolent resistance. No one, positively not Gandhi, asserts that nonviolent resistance would *militarily* be able to resist the sheer firepower of a military

advance.³ Gandhi, I think, would assert that resolution of the political and moral issue is the point of nonviolent resistance, not developing the capability to meet military tactics blow for blow.

Walzer uses Gandhi's own words to press the point that nonviolence would fail in extreme conditions when he writes,

Nonviolent defense is no defense at all against tyrants or conquerors ready to adopt such measures. Gandhi demonstrated this truth, I think by the perverse advice he gave to the Jews of Germany: that they should commit suicide rather than fight back against Nazi tyranny. (Walzer 332)

The way to make sense of Gandhi's advice to the Jews of Germany is to remember that Gandhi is seeking, first and foremost, to change the person on the other side of the conflict, not to "save" lives. Unlike Walzer, Gandhi would never have recommended the Jews fight back with violence against the Nazis, even to save themselves or to strike back at their persecutors, despite what the persecutors might deserve because of their behavior.

Somehow Walzer construes the proper exercise of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence to be contingent on the severity of the violence experienced and that the use violence against persecutors is ultimately required, as he writes here: "Here nonviolence, under extreme conditions, collapses into violence directed at oneself *rather than at one's murders*, though why it should take that direction I cannot understand" (Walzer 332). With this statement Walzer sees Gandhi's failure to advocate using violence as nonsensical, but it makes perfect sense as part of *satyagraha*. For Gandhi there are worse things that can happen than being murdered. Committing a murder for instance.

³ To be fair, Norman does continue to make the point that military advances are for political objectives and that nonviolent resistance can undermine these.

There are at least two ways to understand Gandhi's stark advice. The first is to revisit the role that Jews were forced to play in furthering the Nazi plans of Jewish extermination. While there were German guards at the extermination camps, these camps could not have operated without the labor of the Jews. It was the Jews that operated the crematoria that disposed of the bodies. If Jews had refused to do such work, even if refusal meant death, then, if only in a practical way, they would have been fighting their enemy. There were, of course, many, many Jews that did choose death over doing such work. Gandhi would likely cite their acts as true to *satyagraha*.

The second way to understand Gandhi's advice is remember his philosophy is about changing the other side partly by forcing them to acknowledge the humanity of everyone involved. By advocating suicide by the Jews, Gandhi is pushing both sides in this extreme conflict. Gandhi challenges the Jews to abandon the idea that it is better to accept almost any treatment no matter how wrong or caustic it might be instead of face death. The attitude Gandhi seeks to challenge is analogous to the realism Yoder attributed to the Herodians and Sadducees of Jesus' time. This attitude is one of "just getting along." Gandhi's point is there are worse things than death. In an important way, the Nazis could exploit the opposite of this idea and thereby force the Jews to contribute to their own genocide. While this point might seem to be restating the first point, this is not the intention; rather this is a call to action to the Jews to fight their oppressors early in the conflict, instead of later when things are far worse.

Turning from using violence on others to achieve a goal to capitulating and even inviting violence on one's self is the essence of *satyagraha*. Almost universally, most people accept that it is a good thing to give one's life up or die for a good cause. Gandhi clarifies what a good cause is by asserting that good causes support sacrifice. He discusses circumstances that are purely driven by desires for justice and are not limited to crisis situations. Situations like a mother giving her life up for her children are no less noble acts than the kind that Gandhi sees as necessary or probable, but no one can reasonably say she had much choice in the matter. Choosing to subject oneself to injury or death when there is no intervening crisis to justify the action takes bravery, and only an extremely motivated and a moral person is up to this level of commitment.

Gandhi would concur that it takes bravery but not that the ability is somehow limited to saints or other unusual persons. As he says, "The basic principle on which the practice of nonviolence rests is that what holds good in respect of yourself, holds good equally in respect of the whole universe. All humans in essence are alike. What is, therefore, possible for me is possible for everybody" (Dear 98). This view is essential to Gandhi's approach. If he believed it took unusual characteristics, then his method of engagement would fail. But, Gandhi believes the spark of God is within everyone and the real task then is to reach it. Upon its completion, then the injustice of the situation will be apparent to everyone involved, as will the solution.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha* is based on his unique interpretation of the story of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and his "experiments in Truth." Gandhi achieved a new approach to a terrifically complicated and always tragic set of problems. These problems are in many ways the ultimate problems of humanity. How do we resolve conflicts without disrespecting each other and reducing the each other to objects? How can we interact with each other when doing so seems to mean someone will be harmed or killed? Gandhi provides an approach to these issues that involve the most counterintuitive of attitudes and positions, those of nonviolence and pacifism. Yet, it is unsurprising that difficult problems have counterintuitive and difficult or challenging solutions. What is surprising is that a shy, unassuming little man armed only with his intellect and his religion could challenge and change the world to such a degree that very few do not know both his name and something of his principles.

Chapter 4. Similarities in the Views of Yoder and Gandhi

An Overview

Religion has a large role in supporting war, so it is a prime area for examination. Gandhi and Yoder both engage in the process of clarifying understanding of the proper role of religion regarding war. In this chapter my goal is to provide some explanation of the similarities each thinkers has with the other and also to provide some examples to explicate these common points.

Corresponding Methodologies

Both Yoder and Gandhi employ similar methods and agree on basic approaches to methodology. This similarity in approach is interesting as they come from disparate parts of the world and from different schools of thought, and, of course, very different religious traditions.

First, both see their message as just the latest version of a message God has long been sending. Yoder writes, "Jesus did again what God had done in calling Abraham or Moses or Gideon or Samuel: He gathered His people around His word and His will. Jesus Created around Himself a society like no other society mankind had ever seen" (28). Rather than fulfilling a new mandate, Jesus is fulfilling God's message. Gandhi makes a similar point when he says, "it may be freely admitted that the *Gita* was not written to establish ahimsa. It was an accepted and primary duty even before the *Gita* age" (Duncan 37). Gandhi's point is that ahimsa or nonviolence is an older philosophy that was practiced long

before the *Gita*. In this sense, then, both do not see their message as original but rather as a clarification of an earlier message.

Gandhi and Yoder also agree on the interpretive stance or hermeneutical position necessary for a reasonable interpretation. Both Gandhi and Yoder strive to understand what the original author intended by understanding what she or he would expect their audience of contemporaries to know. An example of this, for Yoder, is the changing meaning of the phrase “ Good News.” Yoder says the original meaning of this phrase comes from the Greek work *euangelion*, which means good news as in news that “impinges upon the fate of the community” (Yoder 15). The Good News that John (John the Baptist) spoke of was that change was coming, and that this change was to be momentous. Yet, many have taken this to mean the coming of Jesus, but to understand the good news in this way is to make the mistake of confusing the message with the messenger. This mistake leads to simplistic interpretations that allow the larger, more important message to go unnoticed (Yoder 16). Yoder’s interpretive stance in this case allows for both a more accurate understanding of the text and also a more expansive one.

An example of Gandhi’s interpretive stance is his re-conception of the role of sacrifice derived from Arjuna’s story in the *Gita*. Specifically, Gandhi says there must be a willingness to sacrifice. Just as Arjuna’s situation entailed his sacrificing something important and dear to him, so too Gandhi sees that willingness to suffer is required. The value Gandhi places on this kind of sacrifice makes it central to his philosophy of non-violence, which he elaborates on in this quotation.

Suffering injury in one's own person is of the essence of non-violence and is the chose substitute for violence to others. It is not because I value life that I countenance with for thousands voluntarily losing their lives in *satyagraha*, but because I know that it results, in the long run, in the least loss of life and, what is more, it ennobles those who lose their lives and morally enriches the world for their sacrifice. (Dear 93)

Suffering, in this conception, is not something that any sane person avoids but is something specifically chosen as the best way to deal with the violence of others. It is an integral part of Gandhi's conception of *satyagraha* and comes directly from his interpretation of the *Gita*.

Both Gandhi and Yoder effectively start from the beginning and reread their respective religious texts and then integrate and interpret what they find there to understand the choices facing people of today. Gandhi does not believe this 'starting from the beginning' is anything particularly unique in the sense that he is the first to do it. As he writes,

I have endeavoured, in the light of a prayerful study of the other faiths of the world, and what is more, in light of my own experiences in trying to live the teaching of Hinduism as interpreted in the *Gita*, to give an extended but in no way strained meaning to Hinduism, not as buried in its ample scriptures, but as a living faith speaking like a mother to her aching child. What I have done is perfectly historical. I have followed in the footsteps of our forefathers. (Duncan 40)

In following in "the footsteps of our forefathers" Gandhi is doing what he feels is the naturally religious thing to do, which is to read and interpret the religious texts and integrate what he finds there with his daily life. Gandhi sees religion as "a living faith speaking like a mother to her aching child." This is using religion to understand the current situation and choices one faces in their daily life.

It is not surprising that when a process such as this is accomplished by sincere and intelligent people that the results may conflict with the accepted wisdom or conventional understanding of what these texts mean. Yoder and Gandhi

effectively replace old superficial and flawed interpretations with new in-depth analysis. Gandhi is more explicit about this than is Yoder, but both engage and supplement the text with historical information about the era the text addresses.

Breaking Down Violence

Both Gandhi and Yoder want to understand the underlying causes of violence and war, and both strive to understand why people choose to respond in these ways. Both men see violence as coming from the nature of humanity and so see it as a recurring theme throughout human history. What may be more surprising is that neither thinker rejects violence out-of-hand but rather considers its use and implications before finally rejecting it.

While Gandhi abhors violence, he does think there are worse actions that one can take. Consider the advice Gandhi gives his son in the following passage.

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence. (Duncan 48)

It was not that Gandhi believed in using violence but rather that violence is better than helpless submission. There are worse responses to some challenges than violence. Yet, Gandhi says, "Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." From this and similar beliefs Gandhi concludes, "Non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment" (Duncan 48).

Yoder, through his analysis of the choices that confronted Jesus, rejects violence because it does not enact enough change, rather than because violence is

wrong. Yoder's analysis of violence is different than Gandhi's on this point.

Yoder writes that Jesus'

rejection of their righteous violence had another type of reason. He did not agree that to use superior force or cunning to change society from the top down by changing its rulers, was the real need. What is wrong with the violent revolution according to Jesus is that it changes too little; the Zealot is the reflection of the tyrant whom he replaces through the tools of the tyrant. (Yoder 23)

Yoder finds that violence is ineffective since it at best amounts to changing those in authority, not in changing the dynamic that initially caused the problem.

Violence is part of the problem not part of the solution. Yoder remarks, "The Zealot resembles the tyrant whom he attacks in the moral claims he makes for himself and his cause: 'in the world, kings lord it over their subjects; and those in authority are called their country's 'Benefactors' (Luke 22:25)'" (Yoder 23).

Yoder's analysis of violence is that any effort that utilizes violence is doomed to the creation of more violence. Using violence to fight violence is like using gasoline to fight a fire, all that happens is the fire burns hotter and faster. While Gandhi concludes that violence is wrong in itself, Yoder does not go this far and only speaks to the ineffectiveness of violence in addressing injustice.

Neither Gandhi nor Yoder give up the idea of violence without analyzing and considering whether it could work, but both find that any approach that uses violence cannot create the kind of world that each see as what God calls upon humanity to create. They both come to the conclusion that respecting the "enemy" is necessary and that doing great harm or violence to one's foe can never be a godlike act and so is never allowable no matter what the alleged benefits might be. Both Gandhi and Yoder assert that the best way to proceed is by understanding why their opponents act in the way they do. In their own way,

they both see that using violence is fundamentally giving up on another person. Giving up on another person is to dehumanize and objectify them, and is not something God would ever do, so neither will Gandhi or Yoder.

What is Pacifism?

War is such a dreadful endeavor that many individuals seek to avoid “doing their duty,” since to do so can greatly increase the chance of one’s dying prematurely. There always have been people who have sought to avoid serving in the military for just this reason. They adopt the pacifist label in an attempt to obfuscate their real reasons for refusing service. Both Gandhi and Yoder feel the need to clarify their pacifism to differentiate themselves from this position. Gandhi was so against cowardliness – the shirking of one’s duty to fight injustice -- that he preferred that a person resort to violence rather than be a coward.

As we have just seen, Gandhi explicitly makes this point when he responds to his son’s question of whether his son ought to use violence to defend Gandhi saying, “I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence” (Duncan 48). Gandhi thought running away from one’s duty (in this case the duty of a son to defend his father) was worse than using violence. Gandhi believed that real pacifists were capable of violence but consciously restrained themselves because they understood that violence supported no real solution to the problem.

Yoder does not make the same argument that Gandhi does, but he does seek to clarify the conventional meaning of pacifism. Yoder believes the conventional meaning of pacifism is composed of two mistaken beliefs. The first

distinction he makes is that pacifism is “a logical, deductive, impersonal kind of legalism taking certain biblical texts or certain ethical principles with utmost rigor, without asking whether it be possible or not to live up to such demanding ideals” (Yoder 34). Yoder thinks this kind of understanding -- what he calls 'a Sermon-on-the-Mount ethic' is simply mistaken. Yoder bases his criticism of this legalistic view of pacifism on the assumption within it that God will only ask what is reasonable. Yoder calls this assumption “a reasonable degree of legitimate self-interest” (46). This “self-interest” is nothing more than a way to rationalize avoiding some ethically responsible actions because they are difficult.

Yoder's second distinction concerns a popular justification of war: Jesus' pronouncement to love one's neighbor. The idea here is that because of our love for our neighbor, everyone has a positive duty to intervene and to use violence, if necessary, if our neighbors are threatened or in substantial danger from others. Yoder sees two problems with this. The first is the reason why we are to love our neighbors. He says it is not because Jesus said we ought to but rather it is because that is the way God is, and so is the way we ought to be. If, on the other hand, if we love our neighbors because simply because Jesus said we ought to we miss the point of why love is important.

The second problem is that this instruction to love one's neighbor is usually just a pretext for the real reasons for war. The fallacy is to assert that pacifists who oppose war are also opposing the precept to love one's neighbor. Yoder says what is really happening is that there are social and political reasons for war, and it is these reasons that pacifists are opposing and not the precept to love one's neighbor. Pacifists may differ with the political and social powers that

be, but they do not, by virtue of their status as pacifists, differ with Jesus or his message. Yoder's point is that pacifism supports Jesus' message of love and forgiveness.

Though each argues differently, both Gandhi and Yoder agree that the conventional understanding that many people share of pacifism is wrong. Gandhi refutes the assertions of some that pacifists are incapable of using violence by asserting just the opposite; pacifists can use violence but choose to *restrain* themselves from using it. Yoder opposes those who think pacifists are fundamentally ethically challenged by their pacifist positions and that they cannot be good Christians and pacifists. Taken separately, each accomplishes the goal of breaking down assumptions contained within the conventional understanding of pacifism. Taken together they reinforce each other and provide a persuasive case for the mistaken assumptions and beliefs contained within the conventional understanding of pacifism.

The Need for Change

Change is a concept that both Gandhi and Yoder *and* those that advocate war agree on. After all, many believe that war is the most radical kind of change, but Gandhi and Yoder would not be among this group. They do agree that change is required, but not simply political change as in change in regime – often the aim of war -- but radical change as in change in perspective. The kind of change they advocate is change on every level including, but not limited to, changes in personal, social and religious ways. Contrary to the generally accepted

belief that war represents radical change, Yoder and Gandhi argue that personal transformation is the most radical kind of change.

Yoder's conception of the new community heralded by Jesus is supported by the idea that the "Good News" message also means "a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person" (Yoder 29). These new patterns of human relationship support the new approaches the community has to interpersonal conflicts between people. While conflicts of the past were met with violence and vengeance, the new community meets them with forgiveness and sympathy.

Gandhi and Yoder make the case for a breaking of the old ways that support war in order to open up new approaches that support a change in the way people see the world. Gandhi and Yoder examine the reasons for war and the costs involved, and conclude that war changes too little and at too high a price. While this does invoke the ideas of utilitarianism, it is not the main reason they reject war, but only one expression of what is wrong with using war to create change. The kind of change they call for is at once more drastic and motivated differently than the kind of change war can make. Yoder and Gandhi's conclusion includes recognition of both the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the methods and motivations supporting the war response.

The Role of Action

Yoder and Gandhi agree on the role action ought to play in pacifism. Yoder sees action as integral to the response modeled by Jesus. As Yoder carefully reconstructs the variety of choices Jesus had before him, the only tenable choice for Jesus involves taking action. Yoder writes that Jesus could

have chosen to avoid interacting with people: "He [Jesus] could withdraw from the tension and conflicts of the urban center where government and commerce constantly polluted even the most well-intentioned son of the law, seeking to find a place where He could be pure and perfectly faithful" (Yoder 24). Jesus could have withdrawn from his society, as many did in his time, but he chose differently.

Gandhi too sees action as essential, and fees inaction was never the right response. When faced with injustice Gandhi thinks action in the right way is the best response. Gandhi thinks the commitment of action entailed suffering and detachment from the result, and so much of his conception of pacifism involves action. Gandhi is careful to clarify what is meant by action "Here all activity, whether mental or physical, is to be included in the term action," includes every action, and the renunciation of fruit does not mean indifference to the result (Duncan 36). As he explains,

But renunciation of fruit in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it. He, who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him, is said to have renounced the fruits of his actions. (Duncan 36)

So for Gandhi, action includes every kind of effort a person brings to bear in fighting injustice. But Gandhi is not recommending action for its own sake. Action for its own sake is like the difference between a racecar going circles on an oval track. The speed may be great but the velocity is zero since the car never gets far from its beginning point. The kind of action Gandhi advocates is like an intercontinental airplane that transports people and supplies. Its speed is great

but so is its velocity because its ending point is a large distance from its starting point. Gandhi's point is that the right kind of action accomplishes many things.

Yoder sees in Jesus the perfect model of engagement with the world. Facing up to the responsibility of being a human being means, for Gandhi, acting in ways that are harmonious with God. Neither Gandhi nor Yoder see passivity as having any role to play in pacifism, and both see action as essential to successfully confronting injustice.

The Proper Role of Religion

Both Yoder and Gandhi think religion is too far removed from everyday ethical and moral decisions. It is likely that they both agree that Kant's assertion that the only questions proper for religion to address are metaphysical questions is too limiting.

To make his point, Yoder uses the example of how religion has been co-opted into the war machinery by its use of chaplains: "It is the service of the chaplain to sanctify the existing order with the hope of being able progressively to improve it" (Yoder 20). Yoder's point is that these chaplains cannot act consistently with their religious beliefs while adhering to the military in which they operate. Further, he thinks that their role causes them to put the concerns of the institution above their religious duties.

Gandhi thought religion was something one lived every moment of every day. As he explains, "Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavour to reach this state is the supreme, the only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*,

as it is of all scriptures" (Duncan 34). If one did not live to be like God, then one could not attain self-realization or ever find God. For Gandhi there is no proper time not to seek God. Every action that is not toward God is away from God.

Both Gandhi and Yoder feel that religion is important in every aspect of human activity. In this sense, both think that there can be no action without God's involvement. To deny this is to deny an essential aspect of both Yoder and Gandhi's understanding of the proper role of religion for humans.

God's Goal for Humanity

Although Gandhi and Yoder are from very different cultures and religions, they understand God's goal for humanity in a very similar way. This goal is to strive to be like God in as many ways as possible. Yoder expresses this in his citing Jesus as the ultimate example of the best way a person can be, and Gandhi similarly cites Krishna as the best expression of godly perfection on earth. Both Yoder and Gandhi make this point in other ways too.

Yoder directly says that God's goal is for humans to be like God: "Jesus is saying that we should not love only our friends because God did not love only His friends. ...We are asked to 'resemble God' just at this one point: not in His omnipotence or His eternity or His impeccability, but simply in the indiscriminating or unconditional character of His love" (Yoder 47). The message is to be like God and love everyone without qualification.

Yoder does not see this as an impossible standard or even an especially difficult one: "This is not a fruit of long growth and maturation; it is not inconceivable or impossible. We can do it tomorrow if we believe. We can stop

loving only the lovable, lending only to the reliable, giving only to the grateful, as soon as we grasp and are grasped by the unconditionally of the benevolence of God" (Yoder 47). Yoder believes this message is innately accessible to everyone, which fits his vision of the omni-predicate God in whom all things are possible.

Gandhi, in a similar way, considers Krishna to be "perfection and right knowledge personified" (Duncan 33). Krishna is an example of someone who has achieved self-realization. From this Gandhi concludes, "The object of the *Gita* appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization" (Duncan 34). In other words, the purpose of the story of Arjuna is to show the way to being like God.

For Gandhi, attaining self-realization is becoming like God. As he explains, "Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavour to reach this state is the supreme, the only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*, as it is of all scriptures" (Duncan 34). In these last two words Gandhi makes the point that all religious texts have as part of their meaning the common idea of being like God. With this Gandhi confirms my point that he and Yoder share much in their view of what God wants for everyone.

The idea that both Gandhi and Yoder are concerned with the broader message from God about the proper goal for everyone is an important point of convergence. This position is the bedrock of their approach and the foundation that supports their later points.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented some of the more important similarities between Yoder and Gandhi. There are many intersecting avenues where these two scholars meet. While I think it unlikely that Gandhi and Yoder actually ever met, it is reasonable to believe that if they had met they would have had much to discuss. Even given the many thousands of miles separating their homes and the wide gulf separating their cultures, the similarities in their approaches and methodologies are many and significant.

Yet, when two widely separated theologians and scholars come to distinctly similar conclusions that oppose the use of violence and war, then those people that feel war is the norm have good reason to question their position. The truth of this proposition becomes more apparent when one reflects on the fact that brutality, violence, and death are inherently part of war. Death and killing can only be justified by referring to something “worth” dying for. In some important ways, religion is uniquely equipped to provide this justification, and it has performed this function for many years. What Gandhi and Yoder do is point out the tenuousness of those religious justifications.

Chapter 5. Using Religious Sources to Develop New Approaches to Social and Political Problems

While clearly neither Gandhi nor Yoder arrived at their position from a purely secular standpoint, I think it is fair to say that, despite the overt religious nature of their work, much of what they say is applicable to addressing the social and political issues of war and violence independent of their religious assertions. In this chapter, I argue for using religious thinkers as sources of insights and strategies for addressing social and political issues. One aspect I will specifically examine are some features of religion and religious thought that make them especially valuable to use in approaching solutions for pressing social and political problems. After completing this, I present some ideas derived from Yoder and Gandhi about approaching the specific problems of war and violence.

Introduction

How are we to approach a problem of such magnitude that it has lasted for many thousands of years and is still adversely affecting the daily life of every human being? This is the immensity and persistence of the dilemma posed by war and violence. Some think there is no “solution” because there really is no problem. Among these are thinkers like Thomas Mann (1875 – 1955) who wrote, “Is not peace an element of civil corruption and war a purification, a liberation, an enormous hope?” (Kohn 269). Psychologists such as John Bowlby argue that

violence is an unconditioned property of humans and especially of men (88 and 166). Sparta is the best example of societies in the past that thought of war in similar terms. (Powell 100) Yet, this position also has a modern expression in the many fascist states of the twentieth century. Under their logic, one cannot avoid what one is, and since war is part of the nature of humanity then war is inevitable. These thinkers interpret the problem of war and violence into what is the best way to shape and dominate it to achieve their, usually national, goals. This view is called realism.

The question of how we win wars and use violence is not the right question; rather the first question is the one best answered. How do we approach immense and persistent problems like war and violence? The answer is to use everything at our disposal to do anything we can to avoid war and, failing that, to minimize its effects. I cannot conceive of a problem that is a greater challenge to humanity than the problem represented by war and violence. It is an understatement to assert that it is a serious problem. It is more than that; it is the perfect example of a life and death problem extended worldwide.

Why should we use religious ideas?

There are many reasons we should use religious ideas in our efforts to combat war and violence. The most basic reason is that many ideas that allow for and justify war have important religious aspects, and war is almost universally justified by religion, even by those who are not religious. As discussed in chapter one, there are principles and philosophies underlying the support of war. These principles provide people with the justification they need to engage in war.

Without this support, the terrible facts of the violence and killing that is integral to war would be too much to bear and the costs too high. We see evidence for this in the strained cries of the families of dead soldiers who plead that the lives of their loved ones not be forfeited for “nothing” and that these deaths “mean” something. The death of one’s child, it appears, cannot be justified except through reference to a greater “need.” This need is typically associated with some higher goal like justice, God, or more recently, democracy. The costs of war are so high that to sustain the costs they need to be justified or balanced. Removing or substantially reducing the underlying principles softens this necessary justification. This logically follows because no one is willing to die or accept the death of a family member for “nothing.”

If religious principles play a crucial role in enabling war and violence, then it makes sense that examining religious principles would be crucial in undermining common support for war and violence. A logical approach entails that we not prejudge our sources. Given that religious ideas and principles are involved in social and political problems like war and violence, then what aspects of religion and religious thought might contribute to successful approaches to these kinds of problems? In the next section, I want to explore the answer to this question.

Conducive Aspects of Religion for Responding to Social and Political Problems with Success

Answering the question raised in the last section involves broadly contemplating some aspects of religious thought that tend to support solutions.

Many of these aspects of religious thought are features that enable ideas and solutions to be effective in ways that non-religious ideas are not. Religious ideas can communicate and motivate in ways difficult or impossible for non-religious ideas.

Any solution to problems as entrenched as war and violence requires the ability to make a strong impression on everyone. Religious ideas have demonstrated this ability. This ability might be attributed to the power of religious institutions and this seems partially correct, but there is more than simply an institutional power at work. The specific ideas seem to have this ability independent of institutional support and seem to resonate with people. This is analogous to how some literature has a power to stay in the collective consciousness over long time periods. The plays of Shakespeare exhibit this quality. The fact that the popularity of these plays has increased over the centuries lends at least indirect evidence that what they say speaks something important to people that transcends the norm. Likewise, the “staying power” of some religious narratives bestows credence on the idea that what they say has lasting value.

Religious ideas may be easier to communicate since they come “pre-packaged” by the religion. While it is unnecessary that everyone must hold the same religious presuppositions in order for the ideas to be valuable and useful, it is true that some and possibly even many people do hold such presuppositions. Communication and education are primary functions of many religions, as are obedience and loyalty. Utilizing these functions to transmit a religious-based response to an urgent social and political issue can be potent. Some might

characterize this assertion as wishful thinking, but history is full of examples of religions effectively joining one side or another in advocating a “solution” to a societal problem. For instance, many religious institutions joined the movement to fight for civil rights in the 1960’s in the United States. The participation of religious institutions yielded this movement much of its power.

The acceptability of a potential solution to urgent social and political ideas is important because many of these issues are long standing and difficult, which usually means that most solutions are likely to be difficult in some important ways. Any solution, whether derived from religion or not, is likely to be complex and difficult simply owed to the persistence and complexity of the problem. Yet, religion provides a “path of least resistance” to implementation of a solution. Because of the functions of religion delineated above, the chances that the solution will be more acceptable to most people than a purely secular response is high.

I do not intend this to be a definitive argument, because the “devil is in the details,” and surely many religiously derived messages generate as much opposition as support. Yet, in a religious context, there is the potential that a message can be crafted that generates a unique type of dedication and support from adherents. This support is crucial to addressing the most intransigent of problems such as war.

As we see in the messages from Gandhi and Yoder, many religious paths involve high moral standards. Pursuing a high moral standard usually involves sacrifices of short-term needs for the possibility of long-term rewards. This long-term perspective seems tailor made for solving many seemingly intractable

challenges that plague humanity such as violence and war. Long-term problems usually require long-term solutions and these solutions, in turn, usually entail short-term suffering. Religions have many centuries of experience communicating many non-intuitive and difficult ideas that entail suffering and a surrendering of short-term objectives for long-term ones. Not to utilize this experience is at the very least narrow-minded.

Synthesis of Yoder and Gandhi's Ideas on War and Violence

In this section I want to examine several general ideas that Yoder and Gandhi jointly make or imply about war and violence that, aside from having a religious connotation, also have a secular one. Then I want to see what these ideas imply about what a solution or response might at least look like. Implicit in what Yoder and Gandhi have to say are several propositions that they would also consider truths. These truths are not limited to religious truths but encompass secular truths backed by secular reasoning. Recognition of these truths is essential in understanding why Yoder and Gandhi think pacifism is a better approach to resolving conflict than is war.

The first truth concerns war. Both Gandhi and Yoder assert that while war does effect change, the change it manages is superficial at best and at worse represents no change at all or one for the worse. The change required to address these underlying conflicts is missing, and what change is achieved comes at the cost of more violence and even more war later. War always seems to set the stage for more war. An examination of the history of war provides secular support for this contention; plus the claim gives a rational explanation of why war has always

been part of history: war is self-perpetuating. Another aspect of war that is a counter to real change is the fact that war entails violence, which entails treating people as objects. This is never a good thing because it denies the basic humanity of the people involved. Kant is among many philosophers who make this very point.

This disrespect is antagonistic to the second truth Gandhi and Yoder see as essential: respecting people as people. Without respect for people, we objectify them, and this opens the door for all manner of mistreatment and abuses. Again, Kant is the best-known secular proponent of this position. It seems obvious that this objectification is a major way that individuals justify their horrendous treatment of others. There is evidence of this splashed throughout the bloody pages of history from the conquest of South and Central America to the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia to the treatment of Native Americans in the westward expansion of the United States. Continually the justification for inhuman treatment is that these are not people but “savages,” to use the common term. Richard Norman also draws a connection between the absence of respect and the present of violence: “The primary case against war is that it is an overwhelming violation of respect for human life” (216-17).

Respecting a person is like the Golden Rule in that if one contemplates another person as a person then he or she would immediately feel reciprocal concern or compassion for that person. This is analogous to what happens when boorish behavior on a man’s part to a woman is brought to his attention by asking him whether he would like his sister, wife or mother treated in the same way.

Respecting someone partly means treating him or her as you would want to be treated.

Yoder and Gandhi also assert that human beings have redemptive powers. People can respond to changing circumstances by adapting and transforming both their behavior and other aspects of their life. Recognition of this truth is essential since without it there would be no hope that a conflict might be resolved in such a way to really address the underlying problem. What Yoder and Gandhi might term as redemptive could be referred to in secular terms as adaptive. If this is so, then secular justifications for this point are easy to locate because there are many examples of adaptability by human beings. One example is the ability of humanity to live in very different climates. Another example is the power of people to find different solutions to problems that are exemplified by free markets. People find ways to live in the Arctic and the desert, just as they find ways to bring new products to market by finding new ways to respond to changing conditions. The idea is that people can change, and to deny this is wrong, both morally and rationally. It is true that necessity of change is or may be required for humans to do what is necessary in order to solve the problem at hand, but recognition of the ability of humanity to change is all that is required to make my point.

Objectifying a person is denying they can change and to abandon hope on him or her as a person. Using violence on a person is saying that a person is beyond changing and is better off dead. Part of this is the idea that a person can “know” another person well enough to make this determination. Yoder and

Gandhi point out the fallacy in asserting access of this kind of knowledge about anyone, or that people cannot change.

While both Gandhi and Yoder stress how individuals ought to relate and respond to others, they also assert that change has to encompass both communities and institutions. The implication is that communities have an obligation to find new ways of addressing conflicts. This implication is not unique or exceptional to religious views since secular democracies are also predicated on being responsible to the people. This “ability to respond” to the needs of the people is something that, generally, every citizen expects from his or her government, democracy or not. Recognition that the old solutions may not be working is also important, even if those “solutions” are as embedded in tradition as is war. Implicit in Gandhi and Yoder’s idea of community is that a major duty of communities is to fight injustice. With this is the idea that communities ought to support the best aspects of its members and not encourage the worse. Again, the idea that institutions have a duty to encourage good behavior is not purely a religious idea but also has strong secular roots.

Paramount to Gandhi and Yoder is that everyone ought to act in godly ways. While this assertion is made using religious terms, the idea that everyone ought to act in good ways is also a secular view. For Gandhi and Yoder this means that violence is not allowed. This conclusion is one that is not shared by most people operating from secular premises, but it is also not one generally accepted by most religious people either. Yet Gandhi and Yoder provide a religious justification that religious people cannot easily disregard, and it is my

contention that their reasoning also provides secular justifications that make it equally hard for those motivated by secular reasons to disregard.

Pacifism is the philosophical bedrock of both of their approaches. Gandhi's and Yoder's readings and interpretations of their religious texts and traditions have led them to this conclusion. The major contention of this essay is that religious ideas can be useful as sources of ideas for addressing pressing social and political issues. Can pacifism be justified by secular reasons? I believe that it can and think that in this section I have presented a case that supports pacifism yet is acceptable to many non-religionists, at least in the aspect that my argument does not necessarily rely on the truth of the range of religious claims.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the utility of using religious ideas as sources of insights and strategies for addressing social and political issues. The central idea is that religious ideas have a value that transcends or is independent of their religious sources. It sounds ironic to say a religious idea, which is usually but not always supposed to be inspired by a transcendent or ultimate source, might "transcend its ultimate inspiration." A religious idea might be said to do this if, besides its religious function, it also serves a secular function. A clearer way to express this concept is to say a religious idea may simultaneously be a good idea in both religious and secular ways, and it may be utilized in both ways. I think this is the case for many ideas shared by Yoder and Gandhi. Their examples testify to the promise of using religious ideas to develop long-term solutions to difficult social and political problems.

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