

"In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi": American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915–1941¹

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American pacifists first heard of Mohandas Gandhi and his struggles in South Africa and India after World War I. Although they admired his opposition to violence, they were ambivalent about nonviolent resistance as a method of social change. As heirs to the Social Gospel, they feared that boycotts and civil disobedience lacked the spirit of love and goodwill that made social redemption possible. Moreover, American pacifists viewed Gandhi through their own cultural lens, a view that was often distorted by Orientalist ideas about Asia and Asians.² It was only in the 1930s, when Reinhold Niebuhr and other Christian realists charged that pacifism was impotent in the face of social injustice, that they began to reassess Gandhian nonviolence. By the 1940s, they were using nonviolent direct action to protest racial discrimination and segregation, violations of civil liberties, and the nuclear arms race.

Scholars have long recognized the influence of Gandhi and his nonviolent struggle for Indian independence on American pacifists, but few have recognized the complexity of that transnational exchange of ideas.³ This circumstance is surprising since historians of

1. I would like to thank Robert Abzug, Eric Meeks, Kelly Mendiola, and the anonymous reviewers of *Church History* for their comments on earlier versions of this essay. For thoughtful comments along the way, I would like to thank Susan Danielson, Sanjay Joshi, and G. Howard Miller.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
3. Historians who have discussed pacifist use of Gandhian nonviolence include James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971); and Lawrence Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1941–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). Chatfield has come closest to interrogating the assumption that Gandhian nonviolence was simply imported to the United States. However, he exaggerates the ease with which nonviolent direct action became an important component of American pacifism. He also does not acknowledge the cul-

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the modern Civil Rights Movement have shown that civil rights activists could not apply Gandhi's method to the problem of Jim Crow without substantially changing it.⁴ As Taylor Branch has put it, "Experience in civil rights had taught them that Christianity needed to be modified for politics and Gandhism modified for American culture. The two systems had to be synthesized, molded, adjusted."⁵ Thus, for example, Gandhi's belief in the power of spiritual purity held limited appeal for African American civil rights activists, and they rarely used tactics like fasting and simple living as part of their nonviolent campaign for freedom and equality. Martin Luther King also had a stronger conviction of human sinfulness than Gandhi, frequently urging his fellow activists against "superficial optimism."⁶ What civil rights scholars have shown, in other words, is that Gandhian nonviolence only took root in the African American community after a process of adaptation and modification.

A similarly complex historical and cultural process occurred in the translation of Gandhian nonviolence to the pacifist community in the United States. As pacifists adopted *Satyagraha* as a method of social change, they reinterpreted it in the context of their religious cosmology and political traditions. This adaptation entailed appropriating Gandhi as a Jesus figure and placing nonviolence within the context of Social Gospel ideals. It also involved discarding their progressive heritage, with its overriding confidence in the power of reason and parliamentarianism to reform social ills. Thus, despite the decline of pacifism within mainline Protestantism over the course of the 1930s, it continued to evolve in ways that would profoundly shape American reform culture in the postwar era.

I. PACIFISTS ENCOUNTER GANDHI

Pacifist sentiment grew tremendously after World War I since many Protestant clergy and social reformers felt that they had been betrayed

tural and religious biases that initially precluded a more sympathetic reception of Gandhi's ideas.

4. See, for example, Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986). For a discussion of the relationship between African Americans and Gandhi before the modern Civil Rights Movement, see Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1993).
5. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 259.
6. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 99. This analysis has been influenced by Bhikhu Parekh, who provides an excellent, albeit brief, discussion of the differences between the African American nonviolent movement and Gandhian nonviolence in *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75-77.

by President Wilson in his war to "save" democracy.⁷ In contrast to sectarian pacifists like the Brethren and the Mennonites, these pacifists were activists committed to building a more just and peaceful world. Reflecting their background in Social Gospel Christianity, they had enormous faith in the power of love and goodwill to overcome systemic evils such as war.⁸ They believed that if an individual or a nation was coerced into doing something against its will, then it would be far more likely to engage in violence in the future. If, however, an individual or a nation was given the opportunity to freely recognize their guilt (that is, repent), then "true reconciliation" was possible. "If you really care about a person, or about a people, if you sincerely and strongly wish them good," insisted Emily Greene Balch, a leader of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), "they will sense it and in time, under halfway normal conditions, they will respond." However, Balch suggested that repentance must be a two-way street. Rich nations like the United States needed to make "many and costly sacrifices, including a timely and generous renunciation of privilege."⁹ Even pacifists more radical than Balch agreed that expressions of love and goodwill, especially if accompanied by self-sacrifice, were the best and most long-lasting ways to achieve international peace. Socialist-pacifist Norman Thomas, for example, called on the "privileged class" to renounce its privilege in the interest of harmony and peace.¹⁰ He felt that the most important task of all was to create "that feeling of good will rather than hate upon which all hope of peace rests. . . . To try to create a spirit of good will rather than hate is a Christian duty."¹¹

Pacifists active in the years between the two world wars also shared a progressive faith in the democratic political process. As Carrie A.

7. Gerald L. Sittser discusses the popularity of pacifism among Protestant clergy during the interwar years in *A Cautious Patriotism: The American Churches and the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

8. For a discussion of the influence of the Social Gospel and Progressivism on American pacifists, see Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*, 15. Carrie A. Foster also emphasizes the progressive and Protestant origins of pacifism in her history of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) during the interwar years. See Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1946* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), especially her conclusion. Robert M. Crunden has demonstrated the close connection between Social Gospel Christianity and Progressivism in *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

9. Emily Greene Balch quoted in Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, 6-7.

10. Norman Thomas to Gilbert Beaver, January 1919, series A-1, box 1, folder 10, Fellowship of Reconciliation Records (hereafter FOR Records), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Penn.

11. Norman Thomas to the members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, August 29, 1917, series A-1, box 1, folder 7, FOR Records, SCPC.

Foster has shown in her study of WILPF between the two world wars, pacifists saw American democracy as a basically sound system that had been corrupted by unscrupulous politicians and self-serving capitalists. They argued that restoring virtue to democratic culture through the electoral process would return government to the citizenry. Since progressive ideology also viewed "the people" as inherently good, then peace, not war, would reign supreme.¹² Thus, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, pacifists sought to abolish war by signing petitions, calling for a referendum before the United States entered a war, supporting legislation making war a crime, and lobbying Congress for an investigation of the munitions industry. They also sought to develop international legal machinery that, like the American Supreme Court, could be an arbiter of last resort in resolving conflicts between nations.

Not surprisingly, then, progressive ideology and Social Gospel idealism shaped how American pacifists viewed Gandhi and the Indian independence movement. Pacifists saw Gandhi as a Christ-like figure who was simply carrying out the demands of the Gospel. Though they admired him, they were at the same time wary of such "coercive" tactics as fasting and civil disobedience. It was not until the early 1930s that they began to reassess Gandhi, which is not surprising since "sweet reason," education, and legislation appeared increasingly inadequate in the face of dramatic conflict between capital and labor and the threat of fascism abroad. As one pacifist put it in 1935, Gandhi's example in India offered a way out of the "Christian dilemma" of feeling as though there were only two alternatives—"violence or ineffectiveness."¹³

John Haynes Holmes exemplifies the way in which pacifists viewed Gandhi through a Christian lens. Minister of the Community Church of New York and an active member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Christian pacifist organization that counted numerous influential Protestant clergy as members, Holmes first heard of Gandhi in 1918 and soon afterwards began a correspondence with him that lasted until Gandhi's assassination in 1948. Holmes believed that Gandhi was the "greatest man in the world" because of his similarity to Christ. As he put it in a 1921 sermon, "When I think of Gandhi, I think of Jesus. He lives his life; he speaks his word; he suffers, strives, and will someday nobly die, for his kingdom on

12. See Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, 332–35.

13. Harvey Seifert, "Gandhi's Method of Social Change," *Fellowship* 1, no. 4 (June 1935): 8–9.

earth."¹⁴ Holmes met Gandhi twice, once in London in 1931 and again in New Delhi in 1947, encounters that reinforced his belief that the Mahatma epitomized Christ's spirit. After their first meeting, he assured his congregation that "Gandhi is again like Jesus—one of the meek, to be sure, but 'the terrible meek.'"¹⁵ Later, in *My Gandhi*, a reminiscence of the Mahatma's influence on his life, Holmes took this comparison even further: "In my extremity I turned to Gandhi, and he took me in his arms, and never let me go. Had the Mahatma not come into my life, I must sooner or later have been lost. As it was, he saved me."¹⁶ While not as prone to sentimentalism as Holmes, other pacifists made similar comparisons. Kirby Page, one of the most well-known and influential Christian pacifists during the years between the world wars, for example, wrote in 1930 that although Gandhi refused to identify himself as a Christian, "few men in history have borne so striking a resemblance to the Divine Galilean."¹⁷

Such comparisons, of course, cut two ways. On the one hand, interpreting Gandhi in terms familiar to Americans was the first step in transplanting Gandhian nonviolence to American soil. On the other hand, though pacifists might admire Gandhi for his evocations of Christian notions of suffering and love, they rarely acknowledged the specifically Hindu roots of his philosophy. They might express appreciation for certain aspects of Eastern religions, but they were not religious relativists. Holmes frequently conflated Hinduism and superstition.¹⁸ Similarly, Reinhold Niebuhr, national chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, habitually asserted that Christianity was superior to Hinduism and Buddhism. As he once put it, liberal Christians had to become more critical of the political status quo or else they risked "enervating the vigor of the race as Buddhism does."¹⁹ Another pacifist, writing in *The World Tomorrow*, the semiofficial organ of FOR, praised C. F. Andrews, the Anglican missionary and follower of Gandhi, as "the broadest possible Christian" but depicted Gandhi as "rather a narrow Hindu." He continued:

14. John Haynes Holmes, *My Gandhi* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 29–31.

15. John Haynes Holmes, "I Meet Gandhi," *The Community Pulpit*, The Community Church of New York, Series 1931–32, Sermon no. 2, 19.

16. Holmes, *My Gandhi*, 29–31.

17. Kirby Page, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Significance: A Biographical Interpretation and an Analysis of the Political Situation in India* (New York: Eddy and Page, 1930), 54.

18. For example, Holmes commented that the tassel of unshaven hair on the back of Gandhi's head was, "a kind of vestigial survival of innocent superstition in his Hindu faith." See *My Gandhi*, 98.

19. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Would Jesus be a Modernist Today?" *The World Tomorrow* 7, no. 3 (March 1929): 122–24. For reasons that are discussed below, Reinhold Niebuhr resigned from the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1934.

To the western mind [Gandhi's] beliefs seem a curious mixture of ancient superstition and modern democratic aspirations. It passes belief that a man of Gandhi's ability could take seriously the heredity of professions, celibacy, and cow protection; and that he should expect his people to refrain from violence in a non-violent revolution. Nevertheless and notwithstanding, Mr. Gandhi is undoubtedly one of the greatest living men.²⁰

Pacifists' rather negative assessment of Eastern religions reflected their background in evangelical Protestantism. Many had served as foreign missionaries or as children had hoped to become missionaries.²¹ Indeed, even though they called on Christian missionaries to disassociate themselves from imperialism and to identify with the nationalist elements in the East, they refused to abandon the ultimate primacy of Christianity. In 1929, for example, *The World Tomorrow* affirmed its "unshaken conviction of the universal need for Christ" at the same time that it praised the Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council for its "new attitude of appreciation of the worthy elements in other faiths."²² Similarly, FOR, the largest pacifist organization in the United States, was an exclusively Protestant organization until 1930. Even then, it retained its Christian identity.

The sense of religious and cultural superiority that informed pacifists' views of the East suggests that they were involved in an Orientalist project. Orientalism, as Edward Said has argued, "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'" It is, in other words, a way of thinking in which the difference between the East and the West is taken for granted and becomes the basis for understanding the history, culture, and politics of Asia. Most

20. Curtis Reese, "Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas," *The World Tomorrow* 8, no. 5 (May 1930): 229. A pamphlet published by Kirby Page and Sherwood Eddy on Gandhi and the political situation in India offers another example of pacifists' rather unsympathetic view of Hinduism. "Paralyzing religious beliefs and social custom block the pathway to social progress." See Page and Eddy, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Significance: A Biographical Interpretation and an Analysis of the Political Situation in India* (New York: Eddy and Page, 1930), 11. In contrast to American pacifists, Gandhi believed that there was truth in every religion and that it was impossible to establish a hierarchy between them. See Parekh, *Gandhi*, 43.
21. Pacifists who served as foreign missionaries include John Nevin Sayre, Sherwood Eddy, Ralph Templin, Lila Templin, Theodore Walser, Gladys Walser, J. Holmes Smith, and Harold Fey. Clarence Pickett, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Kirby Page are among those who as children hoped to become missionaries. One might also consider those pacifists like Dorothy Detzer and Margaret Scott Olmstead, who went as foreign missionaries on Quaker missions to war-torn Europe.
22. Samuel McCrea Cavert, "Momentous Change in Missions," *The World Tomorrow* 7, no. 4 (April 1929): 182-83.

importantly, it is a discourse that justifies the Western project of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”²³ Pacifists certainly accepted the notion that there was a meaningful distinction between the East and the West. They also viewed the East in mythical terms, particularly during the 1920s. In a 1928 article entitled “Oriental vs. Occidental Strategy of Life,” for example, Reinhold Niebuhr suggested that whereas the West was materialistic and forward-looking, the East was mystical and passive. Both had something to offer the other; the West needed to become more spiritual and cooperative, and the East had to develop a more proactive spirit.²⁴ The famous YMCA evangelist and pacifist Sherwood Eddy expressed a similar sentiment in *The Challenge of the East*. Though he supported the nationalist strivings of Asian colonies, he viewed Asian cultures and religions as lethargic and in need of the spirit of Western civilization and Christianity. He described Indians as “a changeless caste- and custom-ridden people” whose recent “awakening” was attributable to “the stimulus and impact of Western culture.” Similarly, while he granted that Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism had made a “priceless” contribution to premodern China, he argued that “some force from outside must integrate and reconstruct China if she is to be saved.” That force, not surprisingly, was Christianity.²⁵

Thus, despite pacifists’ vigorous opposition to imperialism, an ambivalent tone about the capacity of colonized people to rule themselves occasionally surfaced. In 1930, uncertainty crept into an editorial in *The World Tomorrow* calling for Indian independence. “To say that the Indians are not adequately prepared for self-government is true—and quite irrelevant. Ready or unready, the articulate leaders of the Indian people are demanding autonomy and will not be denied. . . . A generous offer of complete dominion status within the near future would probably save the situation.”²⁶ Similarly, in 1927, the journal featured a variety of perspectives on the question of whether the Philippines should become an independent nation. While most called for an end to American rule, several contributors argued that Filipinos were ignorant and unprepared for independence. One

23. Said, *Orientalism*, 2–3.

24. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Oriental vs. Occidental Strategy of Life,” *The World Tomorrow* 8, no. 1 (January 1928): 21–23.

25. Sherwood Eddy, *The Challenge of the East: Asia in Revolution—India, China, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Turkey, Palestine* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), xii–xiv, 19.

26. Editorial, “Death Before Birth,” *The World Tomorrow* 8, no. 8 (August 1930): 323–24. Eddy made a similar argument in *The Challenge of the East*. Although everyone with whom he spoke in India expressed their desire for complete independence from England, Eddy recommended dominion status. See *The Challenge of the East*, 24 and 29.

contributor even suggested that the Philippines needed “an increase of American control in financial and health matters.”²⁷ While such expressions were the exception, they suggest that pacifists had a sense of cultural superiority that characterized most American Protestants in the early twentieth century.²⁸

If the record suggests some uncertainty on the part of pacifists about the capacity of colonized peoples to rule themselves, they were outwardly uncomfortable with the militant and confrontational nature of Gandhian nonviolence. Pacifists feared that tactics like fasting, boycotts, and civil disobedience were coercive, not persuasive.²⁹ Emily Greene Balch, for example, criticized the *Satyagraha* campaigns Gandhi led in 1930 because they appeared to lack the spirit of goodwill that made repentance possible. “An ultimatum is in essence a war method and issues from a war mentality. One never presents an ultimatum to a friend and if Gandhi does not consider the British as friends—however wrong and however wicked—then he has surrendered something more precious than the non-violence principle—the good will principle.”³⁰ Similarly, John Nevin Sayre, co-secretary of FOR, believed that strikes and boycotts were coercive tactics because they placed “pressure and punishment on innocent and guilty alike with no regard for individual personality.”³¹

Even John Haynes Holmes, who spent much of his career popularizing Gandhi as a genius and saint who had saved pacifism from ineffectuality, was ambivalent about Gandhian nonviolence. He never experimented with nonviolent resistance and criticized American pacifists who did. During World War II, for example, he opposed conscientious objectors who practiced nonviolent resistance to racial segregation and violations of civil liberties. Arguing that noncooperation

27. Jeremiah Jenks, “Independence—Today, Tomorrow or Never?” *The World Tomorrow* 5, no. 2 (February 1927): 59–61. My emphasis.

28. Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 277–81.

29. Aversion to coercion has deep roots in the history of American pacifism. Nineteenth-century abolitionists, for example, opposed the use of force or violence as methods in the emancipation of slaves. The question of the ethics of nonresistance became divisive as the sectional controversy heated up, with many abolitionists ultimately supporting the Union in the Civil War. James Brewer Stewart provides an excellent discussion of this controversy in *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976). See also Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* (New York: Pantheon, 1967; reprint 1969).

30. Balch to Mrs. Cousins, July 31, 1930, quoted in Linda Schott, *Reconstructing Women's Thoughts: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Before 1941* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 102.

31. Minutes of FOR National Council and Executive Council Meetings, October 13, 1933, reel 102.02, FOR Records, SCPC.

was an inappropriate tactic for pacifists to use during wartime since it expressed "suspicion and ill-will, of complaint and bitterness of heart," Holmes called on pacifists to "discipline ourselves to friendly and fruitful cooperation with the government."³² At the same time that he criticized American conscientious objectors for practicing non-cooperation, however, he defended the right of Indians to continue their independence movement even while the British were at war.³³ This paradoxical support for nonviolent resistance when Indians practiced it and disapproval of Americans who did the same did not go unnoticed. In an open letter to Holmes that was published in *Fellowship* magazine, Evan Thomas pointed out that although Holmes greatly admired Gandhi, "he is distressed by the non-cooperative technique of Gandhi when American COs attempt to use it."³⁴

II. MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY

Starting in the early 1930s, some pacifists began to reassess Gandhian nonviolence. The tone of pacifist literature on Gandhi also became less ethnocentric and far less reticent in its support for national independence for colonized peoples. This shift can only be understood in the context of a crisis that swept liberal Protestant circles in the early 1930s. As historians Charles Chatfield and Donald Meyer have demonstrated, involvement in struggles for social justice and the crisis engendered by the Great Depression convinced many Protestant pacifists that they had to go beyond moral persuasion and expressions of goodwill if they hoped to radically change society.³⁵

The experience of FOR's southern secretary Howard Kester offers a representative example of this transformation. A native of Martinsville, Virginia, Kester was a Presbyterian minister who became a secretary of FOR in 1926. His involvement in struggles for racial and economic justice in the South challenged his faith in love and moral persuasion. In 1933, his annual report to FOR's national council stated that "to attempt to emancipate the mass of white and Negro workers in the South . . . only through the methods of goodwill, moral suasion and education is to invite the continued exploitation, misery and suffering of generations yet unborn." FOR, he asserted, needed to

32. Holmes editorial, *Fellowship* 10, no. 7 (July 1944): 118.

33. See, for example, Holmes, "What Gandhi is Teaching the World," *The Community Pulpit*, The Community Church of New York, Series 1942-43, no. 2, 4-5. Perhaps one reason Holmes never engaged in nonviolent resistance was that he viewed Gandhi (and thus Gandhian nonviolence) in thoroughly sentimental terms.

34. Evan Thomas, letter to the editor, *Fellowship* 10, no. 5 (May 1944): 98.

35. Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*; and Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

conceive of itself as "a revolutionary movement" and demonstrate far more "realism" and "abandon" than it had in the past. While he did not advocate abandoning either pacifism or Christianity, he clearly felt that pacifists needed to evolve in order to meet more realistically the needs of workers and African Americans.³⁶

Like Kester, Reinhold Niebuhr argued that pacifists had to become more "realistic" if they hoped to radically transform industrial and race relations in the United States. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr contended that although pacifists often analyzed contemporary society "quite realistically," their solutions fell short because they failed to recognize the distinction between the morality of individuals and groups. While education, moral persuasion, and conversion to Christianity might change the behavior of an individual, these would not change society. Society, after all, was a magnification of humanity's lust, greed, ambition, ignorance, and selfishness. The "limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior," made social conflict inevitable. This assertion meant that in a society of competing interests, some level of coercion was necessary for achieving social cooperation.³⁷ It also meant that solutions to social ills consisting of education, accommodation, and compromise were inadequate. As Niebuhr argued, pacifists believed that they could be on both sides, persuading both capital and labor "to a spirit of fairness and accommodation. . . . But will a disinherited group, such as the Negroes, ever win full justice in society in this fashion?"³⁸ Thus, just as coercion held society together, some coercion (such as labor strikes and boycotts) was necessary to achieve social change.

Niebuhr not only suggested that pacifists adopt coercive tactics but also argued that there was no meaningful distinction between violence and nonviolence, a position that eventually led him to reject pacifism altogether. As he put it, once coercion was accepted as ethically justified, "we cannot draw any absolute demarcation

36. Annual Report of Howard Kester, Southern Secretary, Annual Conference of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, October 1933, series A, box 9, folder 6, John Nevin Sayre Records (hereafter Sayre Records), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Penn.

37. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; reprint 1948), xx. For a useful discussion of Niebuhr's ideas, see Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985; reprint 1996); June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Scribner, 1961; reprint, 1972); and Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*.

38. Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, xvii-xix.

between violent and non-violent coercion."³⁹ He offered the example of Gandhi's boycott of British textiles to show that even an act that appeared nonviolent could cause suffering and perhaps even death. He concluded that since the consequences of nonviolence could not be sharply differentiated from violence, then actions could only be judged by whether or not they increased justice. He therefore concluded that equality was "a higher social goal than peace," and that wars for "the emancipation of a nation, a race, or a class" were "in a different moral category from the use of power for the perpetuation of imperial rule or class dominance."⁴⁰ Since violence was not "intrinsically immoral," the "real question" was "what are the political possibilities of establishing justice through violence?"⁴¹

Niebuhr was not the only activist dissatisfied with pacifism as a philosophy of social change. J. B. Matthews, co-secretary with John Nevin Sayre of FOR, felt increasingly out of step with the organization as his politics evolved to approximate Niebuhr's in *Moral Man*. In January 1933, the national council of FOR reproached him when they learned that he had given a speech criticizing Gandhi's movement in India for reasons similar to the argument made by Niebuhr—that Gandhi had failed to make a clear distinction between nonviolence and violence. As he had put it, "Acts of group coercion . . . inevitably result in a measure of physical suffering and destruction of life or property. This is violence and must be frankly faced as such; . . . once we depart from an extreme Tolstoyan view of non-coercion and accept the strategy of group pressure as necessary in our social struggles, there remains no clear ethical distinction between violence and nonviolence."⁴² This speech reveals that even those who argued that pacifists should move beyond "sweet reason" accepted the notion that boycotts, noncooperation, and other similar tactics were coercive and therefore intrinsically violent. They did not argue, as Gandhi did, that practicing "suffering love" while engaging in such tactics helped to create a climate conducive to human understanding and reconciliation.

In February 1933, a crisis erupted in FOR over the issue of whether "coercion" could be considered an appropriate pacifist tactic for achieving social change. That year, the two executive secretaries proposed two entirely different roles for the organization, and both

39. *Ibid.*, 172.

40. *Ibid.*, 234–35.

41. *Ibid.*, 180.

42. Minutes of FOR National Council and Executive Council Meetings, January 6, 1933, reel 102.02, FOR Records, SCP.

threatened to resign over the issue. While Matthews called on pacifists to recognize that coercion and violence might be necessary in the "class struggle," Sayre wanted FOR to concentrate on "searching for and experimenting with non-coercive practical methods of pure love and persuasion. . . . I am moved toward the adventure of trying to develop an effective technique for the solving of social conflict by corporate processes of moral persuasion."⁴³ Neither man represented the majority opinion in the Fellowship, which was somewhere in between the two extremes, but their intractability forced pacifists to reconsider Gandhian nonviolence.

Initially, it appeared as though Sayre's vision for the organization had triumphed. After spending a year debating the proper scope of pacifist activity and its relationship to working-class struggles for economic justice, FOR accepted Matthews' resignation and appointed Sayre national chairman. FOR also stated that staff members could *not* take a position on the "class war" that went further than advocating "nonviolent coercion" by which they meant civil disobedience, strikes, and boycotts. In the process of making these changes, FOR lost some of its most well-known and politically active members. Howard Kester resigned his position, pointing out that since his position was similar to that of Matthews, he would have been fired anyway.⁴⁴ Kester's departure was a huge loss for FOR; as John Egerton has remarked, it "would be difficult to name any white Southerner of the time who had more contacts across racial lines than [Kester] did, or more of a clear-eyed vision of the crippling effects of segregation on blacks and whites alike."⁴⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr also resigned from FOR's national council, arguing that refusing to sanction coercion was politically irresponsible and morally unethical unless "pure pacifists" were "willing to renounce the world (including the comforts and securities which come out of a coercive economic and political system)."⁴⁶ Niebuhr did not bother to address the question of those pacifists who endorsed coercion but who refused to sanction violence; he had already demonstrated in *Moral Man* his belief that coercion and violence were basically the

43. Minutes of FOR National Council and Executive Council Meetings, March 3, 1933, reel 102.02, FOR Records, SCPC.

44. Minutes of FOR National Council and Executive Council Meetings, December 16, 1933, reel 102.02, FOR Records, SCPC. See also Kester to Sayre, January 16, 1934, series A, box 9, folder 6, Sayre Records, SCPC.

45. John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 126.

46. Quoted in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 155. See especially chapters 6–8 for Niebuhr's views on pacifism.

same thing. Following his resignation from the national council, Niebuhr no longer called himself a pacifist and, indeed, spent much of his remaining career arguing that pacifism—and the liberal theology that had provided its justification—was politically and ethically untenable.⁴⁷ Losing the man who would become America's most influential theologian was "a demoralizing blow to the FOR—much greater than the loss of J. B. Matthews," as Harold Fey, executive secretary of FOR for the remainder of the 1930s, would later recall.⁴⁸

Although not directly connected to the controversy over Matthews' resignation, A. J. Muste renounced Christian pacifism and became a Marxist-Leninist at around the same time. Muste's defection was a devastating loss for the pacifist community because, as head of Brookwood Labor College and the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, he represented one of the pacifist community's closest links to organized labor. In retrospect, Muste attributed his rejection of pacifism to his failure to comprehend "how to apply nonviolence effectively" to the economic catastrophe wrought by the Great Depression. Indeed, he recalled that "the effort to apply Gandhian methods to American conditions had scarcely begun. Pacifism was mostly a middle-class and an individualistic phenomenon. The churches certainly were not giving illustrations of spiritual force, of true community, which might have had a nonviolent but transforming influence."⁴⁹ The Communists and their allies, on the other hand, were "banding people together for action, . . . were putting up a fight. Unless you were indifferent or despairing you lined up with them."⁵⁰ Thus, in a few words, Muste summed up the state of the pacifist community in the early 1930s. Though most pacifists identified themselves as socialists, participating in struggles for economic and social justice appeared to compromise their pacifism in ways that made them uncomfortable. Some, like Niebuhr and Muste, concluded that pacifism and revolution were mutually exclusive and chose the latter. Others, however, began to reconsider Gandhian nonviolence as an alternative to their feelings of political impotency.

47. See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, especially chapters 6–8.

48. Harold Fey, "Some Notes on the History and Activities of the Fellowship of Reconciliation Between the Years 1935 and 1940. Recollections by Harold E. Fey, Executive Secretary During that Five-year Period." August 1989, section II, series C, box 1, folder 1, FOR Records, SCPC.

49. A. J. Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," reprinted in Nat Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 137.

50. *Ibid.*, 134–37.

III. THE POWER OF NONVIOLENCE

At the same time that pacifists faced a crisis over their ideology and methodology, they enjoyed more frequent and intimate contact with Gandhi and his followers. As a result, many began to take Gandhi seriously as a pragmatic politician with insights that could help pacifists prove that they were not politically irrelevant, as Niebuhr and others charged. This trajectory of pacifist thought has been overlooked by historians of American Christianity, who have tended to focus on the evolution of Christian realism (or neo-orthodoxy), which became hegemonic within mainline American Protestantism after World War II.⁵¹

There is abundant evidence that communication between American pacifists and individuals active in India's independence struggle intensified around the time Gandhi launched his *Satyagraha* against the salt tax. In 1929, Gandhi's follower C. F. Andrews visited the United States and met with American pacifists. The following year, India's poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore traveled to the United States under the sponsorship of the American Friends Service Committee.⁵² Gandhi corresponded with several American pacifists and published serially Kirby Page's *War: Its Causes, Consequences, and Cure* in his newspaper.⁵³ For their part, American pacifists published Andrews, Tagore, Gandhi, and other participants in India's campaign for independence. They also traveled to India. Kirby Page and Sherwood Eddy, for example, went to India in 1929, where they spent three days with Gandhi discussing *Satyagraha* and relations between India and England.⁵⁴ Another example of this cross-cultural exchange was the six-month tour of Burma, Ceylon, and India by African American pacifist Howard Thurman and his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, in 1935. Thurman later recalled that his discussion with Gandhi about the relevance of nonviolent resistance for the African American struggle for equality was the highlight of the tour.⁵⁵ Pacifist missionaries also became familiar with Gandhi's ideas. J. Holmes Smith and Ralph Templin became so committed to Indian independence while serving as foreign missionaries that the British expelled them for disloyalty.

51. See, for example, Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*.

52. See Lawrence McK. Miller, *Witness for Humanity: A Biography of Clarence E. Pickett* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1999).

53. See Kirby Page, *Social Evangelist: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Prophet for Peace* (Nyack, N.Y.: Fellowship, 1975), 47.

54. See Page, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Significance*.

55. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 114.

These visits appear to have increased pacifists' understanding and sympathy for Gandhi, his ideas, and the Indian independence movement. Following his return from India, Kirby Page published a pamphlet that aimed to explain Gandhi and the political situation in India to Westerners. Page documented the devastating impact of colonialism on the Indian economy and showed that, over the course of India's long struggle, the British had violated its promises and mistreated its subjects. He sympathetically presented Gandhi's point of view with numerous quotes, including his reasons for refusing to attend the Round Table Conference of 1929. Page also suggested that Gandhi's method represented "political wisdom and practicability" and implied that American pacifists should take notice.⁵⁶

Page's pamphlet was, however, more of a description of the political situation in India than a systematic discussion of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and how and why it was an effective technique for fighting injustice. It was left to Quaker-pacifist Richard Gregg, who had spent four years in India, seven months of which he spent at Gandhi's ashram, to demonstrate why *Satyagraha* was a realistic and effective method of social change. In *Gandhism Versus Socialism*, published in 1932, and *The Power of Nonviolence*, published in 1934, Gregg explained how nonviolent resistance worked rather than elaborating on its moral beauty.⁵⁷ According to Gregg, nonviolent resistance was effective because it functioned as "moral jiu-jitsu." By refusing to use violence and exhibiting honesty, determination, and moral courage, nonviolent resisters gained the moral high ground. Their attitude of love and willingness to endure suffering also showed that they had "respect for the personality and moral integrity of the assailant." As a result, nonviolent resisters threw oppressors off guard and made them unsure of their position. Nonviolent resistance was also transformative; it had the power to "convert the opponent, to change his understanding and his sense of values."⁵⁸

Gregg's book was, in many ways, a response to Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.⁵⁹ Unlike Niebuhr, who made his case against pacifism by arguing that organized society was built on coercion,

56. Page, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Significance*, 35.

57. Richard Gregg, *Gandhism Versus Socialism* (New York: John Day, 1932); Gregg, *The Power of Non-violence* (Philadelphia, Penn.: J. B. Lippincott, 1934). *The Power of Nonviolence* was an expanded version of Gregg's *The Psychology and Strategy of Gandhi's Non-Violent Resistance* (Triplicane, Madras, India: S. Ganesan, 1929).

58. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, 46–49.

59. Sometimes this was quite explicit, as when Gregg cited Niebuhr's argument that love without sacrifice is futile in order to convince his readers that pacifism was ineffective unless pacifists were willing to endure suffering. See Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, 281.

force, and power, Gregg argued that social control “comes from ideas and sentiments—a scheme of values, a set of ideals or activities which people desire and believe to be right.” In terms reminiscent of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Gregg argued that “Class divisions cannot be ended by violent strife, nor by destroying the material power of the class in control, but only by changing their ideology, their values, the assumptions upon which their class greed and pride are based.”⁶⁰ The genius of Gandhian nonviolence was that it was not solely concerned with resistance, but with creating “a new and durable set of values.” In contrast to modern, industrial society, which valued money, martial strength, social prestige, parliamentary democracy, and large-scale organization, Gandhi posited cooperatives, love and simplicity, willingness to “take direct action,” and reliance on small groups.⁶¹ Moreover, Gandhi’s emphasis on loving and converting his opponents meant that when change came, it would be far deeper and longer lasting than a peace imposed by violence.

Gregg also attempted to refute another assumption that provided the basis for Niebuhr’s attack on pacifism—namely, that nonviolent resistance and physical coercion amounted to the same thing. Though he admitted that nonviolent resistance, like coercion, “may . . . yield suffering, restriction of freedom or loss of property” and that it was not always possible to “draw a sharp line between violent and non-violent coercion, and between coercion and persuasion,” he insisted that nonviolent resistance was different “*in-kind*” from the coercion of physical force. It was different because it relied on psychic as opposed to physical force. As he put it, “With coercion there is frequently an idea of fear of bodily harm as an element in the compulsion. Unlike coercion, non-violent resistance respects the personality of the opponent. In non-violent resistance the resister tries to take upon himself as much as possible of whatever suffering there may be involved.” He also pointed out that nonviolent resistance appealed to the oppressor and helped people make moral choices so that they would be freed from their “prejudice, hatred, anger, and greed.” Indeed, he preferred to think of nonviolent resistance not as coercion but as moral pressure, and he pointed out that “moral pressure imposes itself only upon those who accept moral assumptions and values.”⁶²

Gregg differed from Niebuhr in yet another important respect. While Niebuhr was reviving the doctrine of original sin and using it as a basis for his rejection of pacifism, Gregg retained the Social

60. *Ibid.*, 136–37.

61. Gregg, *Gandhism Versus Socialism*, 8.

62. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, 147–50.

Gospel belief that love was the dominant force in the universe and that all human beings were "at bottom decent." As he put it, the "basic assumption" of nonviolent resistance was that "human traits of love, faith, courage, honesty, and humility exist in greater or less strength in every person."⁶³ Given his understanding of human nature and the moral universe, it is not surprising that Gregg had faith in nonviolent resistance. By constantly experimenting with nonviolence, he argued, pacifists would "steadily [gain] more power and more understanding of how to solve social problems in the direction of increasing social justice."⁶⁴ Niebuhr, on the other hand, could not take this leap of faith because he held a far more gloomy assessment of human nature and skepticism about progress.

Gregg's book was not without its limitations. For one thing, like Gandhi, he assumed that all human beings were essentially good, that their hearts would be moved by the power of self-suffering, and that a free press existed in which to publicize that suffering. As Bhikhu Parekh has commented, "*Satyagraha* presupposes a sense of decency on the part of the opponent, an open society in which his brutality can be exposed, and a neutral body of opinion that can be mobilized against him. It also presupposes that the parties involved are interdependent, as otherwise non-cooperation by the victims cannot affect the vital interests of their opponents." Yet, as Parekh points out, "some human beings might be profoundly distorted and beyond hope."⁶⁵ Indeed, unimaginable suffering has occurred in human history without sparking the moral conscience of those in power. Moreover, the ruthless suppression of public discourse and the sanitized and hidden violence of totalitarian regimes leave little room for the power of public opinion to take its course.

Despite its limitations, *The Power of Nonviolence* marked an important departure for American pacifists. First, unlike many of his contemporaries who preferred to avoid the issue, Gregg directly confronted the question of whether or not nonviolent resistance was coercive and therefore violent. While his answer probably failed to satisfy critics like Niebuhr, it was reasonable to suggest that the element of self-suffering made nonviolent resistance fundamentally different from coercion and violence. Secondly, Gregg moved away from the progressive ideology that had shaped American pacifism since World War I. While he recognized the value of reason, he argued

63. Ibid., 87, 51.

64. Gregg to John Nevin Sayre, February 23, 1933, quoted in Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*, 203.

65. Parekh, *Gandhi*, 74–75.

that sometimes human relationships become so pathological that "sudden and drastic action" was necessary for creating a better social order.⁶⁶ Similarly, Gregg was unimpressed with the legislative approach to solving the problem of war. Citing Niebuhr's argument that the "have" nations would never willingly renounce their wealth and power, Gregg argued that peacemakers had to go beyond the externals of world courts, leagues of nations, and peace pacts and address the "deep seated inconsistencies and forces working for war in many parts of the economic, social, educational and organized religious systems."⁶⁷ Moreover, by drawing attention to the power of culture and ideology, he suggested that Western pacifists had to conceive of nonviolence far more broadly than they had in the past.

Finally, Gregg's book marked a departure from the ethnocentrism that frequently colored Western pacifists' interpretation of Gandhi. The Gandhi of *The Power of Nonviolence* was not the mystical Jesus figure described by Page and Holmes, but rather an expert strategist and soldier. Throughout the book, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions appeared side by side with Christianity, each with its own pacifist tradition; "The principles of nonviolent resistance had already been conceived and applied independently by numerous seers and courageous people in many different countries. Among them were Lao Tsu, Confucius, Buddha, the Jain Tirthankaras, Jesus Christ, St. Francis of Assisi, George Fox, Leo Tolstoi and many others too numerous to mention." Gandhi was simply the first person "in modern times who [had] worked out the theory and applied it to mass movements in organized corporate fashion, and proved the validity of this extension by actual successful campaigns in numerous difficult situations." By drawing on Western social science and political theory to make his argument, Gregg also showed that Gandhian nonviolence was not somehow uniquely suited to "Oriental psychology."⁶⁸ Indeed, placing nonviolence within contemporary Western understandings of psychology, sociology, and biology suggested that nonviolence was universally applicable. His depiction of Western pacifism as "barren in both accomplishment and technique" and Gandhian nonviolence as dynamic and far-reaching suggested, moreover, that Westerners had much to learn from the people they had colonized.⁶⁹

66. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, 75-76.

67. *Ibid.*, 158.

68. *Ibid.*, 40.

69. *Ibid.*, 222-23.

IV. NONVIOLENCE IN ACTION

Gradually, over the next few years, American pacifists began practicing nonviolent resistance or, as they called it, nonviolent direct action. This practice was by no means true of all pacifists. In fact, most of them remained wedded to "sweet reason" and legislation as the best means for achieving peace. This notion was particularly true of all-female pacifist organizations like WILPF, which, as Carrie A. Foster has suggested, was made up of women who were "Progressives first and pacifists second."⁷⁰ But the combination of Niebuhr's critique, contact with Gandhi and his followers, and impending world war convinced many of them—especially the younger generation—that they had to move beyond traditional methods.⁷¹ This conviction was particularly true of pacifists involved in FOR who, because of the controversy over the question of its attitude toward coercion and violence, had been forced to grapple with the limits of its ideology and methodology. Indeed, as the largest pacifist organization during the interwar period, FOR offers a window into the story of how pacifists adopted nonviolent direct action as a strategy for social change.

Although John Nevin Sayre may have wanted FOR to focus exclusively on moral persuasion and conversion, it was clear that the organization needed to explore other methods for achieving radical social change and a world without war. By 1933, the majority of its members believed that the organization should "identify itself with the cause of the under-privileged," and half of them called for "the use of non-violent coercion in behalf of that cause."⁷² FOR leaders met in December 1935 to reconsider the organization's "purpose and

70. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, 343. There were three women's pacifist organizations during the years between the two world wars, WILPF, the Women's Peace Society, and the Women's Peace Union. The latter two organizations, which were tiny to begin with, had dissolved by the time the United States entered World War II. WILPF managed to survive the war, but its numbers were greatly reduced. I find Foster persuasive when she suggests that a main reason for this decline was their failure to explore Gandhian nonviolence, and that this failure was rooted in their strong attachment to progressive ideology. By contrast, FOR and the War Resisters' League experienced a surge in membership during the war years, partly because young pacifists were drawn to their commitment to Gandhian nonviolence. For a discussion of women's peace organizations between the two world wars, see Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

71. A good example of how Niebuhr's critique prompted a flurry of introspection among pacifists is a position paper of a draft of an article titled "Do Pacifists Uphold Violence?" written by Harold Fey in 1936. See section II, series C, box 2, folder 4, FOR Records, SCPC.

72. Minutes of FOR. National Council and Executive Council Meetings, December 16, 1933, reel 102.02, FOR Records, SCPC. See also "Message and Program," *Fellowship 1*, no. 8 (December 1935): 3-4.

program" in light of this sentiment and, after a long discussion, stated their commitment to "building up techniques for non-violent resistance."⁷³ Soon thereafter the new FOR organ, *Fellowship* magazine, began publishing articles praising sit-down strikes as examples of nonviolence in action.⁷⁴ FOR also urged members to form discussion groups to study Richard Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* and to consider how it related to relations between capital and labor.⁷⁵ By 1941, these discussion groups were known as "cells," and their stated purpose was not only to study Gandhian nonviolence but to apply it to concrete social situations.⁷⁶

Despite this interest in exploring Gandhian nonviolence, theorists put nonviolence into action on only one occasion during the 1930s. In November 1936, two pacifists who were members of the American Federation of Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers organized a "lie down" conducted in the "spirit of nonviolence" by members of their local in front of the factory gates.⁷⁷ That this was the only attempt by pacifists to actually practice nonviolent resistance reflects their persistent fear that it was coercive and therefore incompatible with their larger goal of reconciliation. At the 1935 meeting in which FOR discussed nonviolent resistance, for example, pacifists argued that reconciliation "is best exercised by one who remains above or beyond the conflict. . . . Non-violent coercion, on the other hand, is a method whereby ardent believers in the justice of some cause seek to bring to it the victory. Fundamentally, this is not reconciliation at all. It is an

73. "Message and Program," *Fellowship* 1, no. 8 (December 1935): 3-4. Quote is from the FOR's executive secretary, Harold Fey, "Realistic Reconciliation," *Fellowship* 1, no. 8 (December 1935): 4-7.

74. See, for example, Claude Williams, "Prison Memoir," *Fellowship* 2, no. 1 (January 1936): 3-4; and Delores Ruppberg, "Labor Tries Non-violence," *Fellowship* 2, no. 3 (March 1936): 9-10.

75. See, for example, Jerome Davis, "Non-violent Techniques for Industrial Justice," *Fellowship* 2, no. 9 (November 1936): 9-11; and Gerald Heard, "The New Pacifism," *Fellowship* 3, no. 6 (June 1937): 3-4.

76. See "The Pacifist and Self-Discipline," FOR Conference, September 6-8, 1940, series A-1, box 5, folder 2, FOR Records, SCPC; and "Open Paths for the International FOR," October 6, 1941, section I, box 1, folder 8, FOR Records, SCPC. Note that these cells were also formed to provide fellowship and community to isolated pacifists during the war. See, for example, a pamphlet published by FOR titled "Christian Pacifist Conferences," series A-1, box 5, folder 14, FOR Records, SCPC. Note that the War Resisters League also began discussing nonviolent resistance at the end of the 1930s, which is not surprising since the organization had many of the same members as FOR (though it was a much smaller organization than FOR). In 1939, WRL issued a pamphlet by Jessie Wallace Hughan in which she suggested that nonviolent resistance would stop an invasion of the United States. See Hughan, *If We Should Be Invaded* (New York: War Resisters League, 1939).

77. Herbert G. Bohn, "We Tried Non-Violence," *Fellowship* 3, no. 1 (January 1937): 7-8; and A. J. Muste, "Sit Downs and Lie Downs," *Fellowship* 3, no. 3 (March 1937): 5-6.

instrument of power." They acknowledged that there was some justice in Gandhi's argument that "non-violent coercion" was "an instrument of love, that it conquers by the force of love and in that sense brings reconciliation." But their belief that Gandhi's last hunger strike was an act of violence suggests that they were uneasy with this argument. They doubted that the hunger strike "was a victory of love or that [his opponents] were any less irritated by the necessity of submission than they would have been had physical violence been used." This conclusion did not mean they would not side with the "under-privileged" nor practice Gandhian nonviolence, but they insisted that pacifists recognize the distinction between reconciliation and nonviolent resistance.⁷⁸

Pacifist ambivalence about Gandhian nonviolence was so widespread that it was not until 1941 that FOR—alone among pacifist organizations—made nonviolent resistance a formal part of its program. This change occurred largely because of the influence of A. J. Muste, who renewed his involvement with FOR in 1936 following a mystical experience in which he re-converted to Christianity and pacifism. When Muste became co-secretary of FOR in 1940 with John Nevin Sayre, a new generation of pacifists joined him in calling for a nonviolent direct-action movement modeled after Gandhi's movement in India.⁷⁹

Muste's commitment to Gandhian nonviolence grew out of his experiences and convictions as a labor organizer, radical, and Christian minister. As leader of the American Workers' Party and the Trotskyist Workers' Party of the United States, Muste had observed that although his comrades were courageous, self-sacrificing, and idealistic, they lacked basic qualities of honesty, truthfulness, and mutual trust. What had corrupted them was "the philosophy of power, the will to power, the desire to humiliate and dominate over or destroy the opponent, the acceptance of the methods of violence and deceit, the theory that 'the end justifies the means.'" He concluded that once one assumes that "in some situations, you must forswear the way of love, of truth, must accept the method of domination, deceit, violence, . . . there is no stopping place." His return to pacifism thus grew out of a renewed appreciation of pacifists for

78. "The power of reconciliation and the power of nonviolence would seem to be so different as not to lend themselves to the service of a common purpose. Indeed in most conflict situations they would seem to be mutually exclusive." "Message and Program."

79. The best biography of Muste is Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste* (Philadelphia, Penn: Temple University Press, 1981). See also Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste* (New York: MacMillan, 1963).

respecting human dignity and paying attention to means.⁸⁰ At the same time, however, he criticized pacifists for failing to recognize that pacifism was a “revolutionary” creed that required commitment, discipline, and a willingness to die. He further argued that pacifism was a religion, “an inner experience, an inner attitude, a way of life, not merely a tool or device which the individual uses in certain circumstances on his environment.”⁸¹ Pacifists, in other words, had to adopt the Left’s commitment and dedication, while the Left had to develop spiritual resources and discard its fascination with power and violence.

Muste’s experiences in the labor movement and the Left gave him a different perspective on many of the issues that had prevented pacifists from fully embracing Gandhian nonviolence. He was less hesitant about siding with labor against capital. He was also far less enamored of the formal political process. Like Gandhi, he believed that the modern state threatened real democracy by assuming responsibility for so much that individual citizens could do themselves. He often warned that until people recognized that “systems and institutions exist for man, not man for institutions,” then the trend toward totalitarianism in modern life would continue. Also in contrast to many of his pacifist peers, Muste believed that the distinction pacifists drew between persuasion and coercion was logically untenable. As he once commented, “It seems to me that there is a tendency [among pacifists] to believe that social pressure and organization are necessarily in one category and the ideal of love in a completely different category, which really is not true of anything which has to do with life rather than with logic.”⁸² Instead of attempting to draw a line between persuasion and coercion or coercion and violence, pacifists had to consider the “inner motivation” of an action and its results from the point of view of all involved. In this sense, he argued, nonviolence was superior to violence, since the latter was “always fraught with danger.”⁸³

Just as Muste’s radical past made him more inclined to embrace direct action, his Christian faith convinced him that nonviolence was essentially religious in nature.⁸⁴ Muste based this argument on a

80. Muste, “Return to Pacifism,” reprinted in Hentoff, ed. *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 199–201.

81. Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), 175.

82. See Muste’s notes on William Lovell’s paper, FOR Study Conference on Revolutionary Pacifism, February 1, 1945, series A–1, box 5, folder 11, FOR Records, SCPC.

83. Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, 125–26.

84. In this way, Muste went beyond Gregg. While Gregg personally viewed nonviolence as a philosophy of life, his book focused on demonstrating that nonviolent resistance

particular understanding of Christianity, one that was rooted in the Social Gospel. First, he argued that Christianity recognized the "absolute value of the individual," which was the starting point for pacifism. Second, Muste believed that Christianity was not an unrealizable ideal, as Niebuhr suggested, but rather a blueprint for how to bring "peace and the Kingdom [of God]." For Muste, in other words, suffering love as exemplified by Jesus Christ was a "social concept" as opposed to an individual ethic. He pointed out that Jesus modeled himself after the Hebrew prophets, who asserted that righteousness was more important than power and that defeat was not a sign of God's injustice but rather a sign of one's own failure to be righteous and just. Just as the prophets emphasized the importance of repentance, Christ suffering on the Cross was essentially a repentant act; it suggested that taking responsibility for one's own sins would liberate others to do the same. Thus, Muste concluded that by expressing love and accepting that one might be killed, people might fundamentally transform human society and usher in the day of peace.⁸⁵

Muste did not, however, fail to appreciate the depth of human sin. Historians have portrayed him as an idealist, who expressed the "pure, unmixed, unadulterated soul of the Social Gospel," in the words of Donald Meyer.⁸⁶ Yet Muste's theological orientation always retained elements of his Calvinist past. Raised and ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church, he had a "strong conviction about human frailty and corruption." But he insisted that this was "not the Christian last word." "*Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.*" God was "infinite justice and righteousness," but also "infinite mercy." Forgiveness, moreover, came with the charge "go and sin no more."⁸⁷ "The Scriptures," he later wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr, "are not simply an extended commentary on the single text, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' We read in them the commandment, 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,' and the promise, 'Behold, I make all things new.'"⁸⁸

Thus, unlike Niebuhr, whose growing appreciation of human depravity led him to reject pacifism, Muste saw his pacifism confirmed.

was "realistic." Muste, on the other hand, argued that nonviolence was a philosophy that had profound implications for one's personal life as well as one's political life.

85. Muste made his argument for "prophetic Christianity" in numerous forums. In fact, he identified himself as a "Jewish-Christian." See, for example, the lectures he delivered at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1944, reel 3, A. J. Muste Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Penn. See also Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, 21–25.

86. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*, 369.

87. Muste, "Pacifism and Perfectionism," reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 312, 319.

88. Muste, "Theology of Despair," reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 307.

According to Muste, the moment an individual repented and received divine forgiveness, it was no longer possible for him or her to view another human being as an enemy. The "cardinal error" was the "sin of separating oneself from others. . . . Biologically we are of one blood. . . . 'They' are bone of 'our' bone, flesh of 'our' flesh, spirit of 'our' spirit. . . . Above all, we are children of one divine Father. Setting oneself apart from anyone is the key mistake, the most hideous sin."⁸⁹ Christian perfectionism—of which pacifism was a central component—expressed this truth. Indeed, Muste insisted that the moral "tension" of which Niebuhr and other neo-orthodox theologians so often spoke "exists only if the impossible demand of the Gospel is laid upon them."⁹⁰

Thus, like Gandhi, Muste's understanding of nonviolence was essentially religious. Also like Gandhi, Muste's view of nonviolent resistance was broad in scope. It was not, as many American pacifists believed, merely a method of social change, but rather a way of life that required pacifists to radically transform their lives. Indeed, Muste called on American pacifists to model themselves after Gandhi's followers and subject themselves to training and discipline designed to cleanse themselves of self-righteousness and fear. Though he was "dubious" about Gandhi's desire to go back to a preindustrial economy, he also believed that there were "elements implied or suggested by Gandhi's emphasis on spinning [that are] essential to an adequate non-violence movement." Those elements included clarifying precisely what "kind of economic order to strive for," the need to take action "now" as opposed to waiting for some day in the future, and the importance of manual work for lifting "the individual spirit" and for "unifying" pacifists and their non-pacifist neighbors." Most of all, Muste wanted American pacifists to recognize that Gandhi's movement was a political movement. Like Gandhi, they had to build a mass movement, one that reached out to "oppressed and minority groups such as Negroes, share-croppers, industrial workers, and help[ed] them to develop a nonviolent technique, as Gandhi did in the India National Congress." They also should pursue cooperation between Eastern and Western nonviolence movements, which he suggested, might "well come to have a decisive influence on world events."⁹¹

The similarity between Muste's theory of nonviolent resistance and Gandhian nonviolence should not, however, obscure the indigenous

89. Muste, *Not By Might, Christianity: The Way to Human Decency* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 59.

90. Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, 33.

91. Muste, "The World Task of Pacifism," reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 223–25.

roots of Muste's ideas. It was his understanding of Christianity as a prophetic religion that encouraged him to interpret Christ suffering on the Cross as a social concept. It was his experience as a radical labor leader that convinced him that pacifists had to dedicate themselves to fighting oppression with the conviction and spirit of self-sacrifice that motivated Communists. Thus, just as Gregg had drawn on Western social science and psychology to explain Gandhian nonviolence to American readers, Muste drew on the prophetic tradition and the language of American radicalism to make his argument that pacifists had to engage in nonviolent resistance. Moreover, as much as Muste believed that pacifists could learn from Gandhi, he was willing to discard those elements of Gandhi's program—such as Gandhi's animus toward industrialized society—that he believed were arcane.

When FOR made Muste co-secretary in 1940, he hoped to transform the organization into a vehicle for building a mass "nonviolent direct action Movement" along the lines of Gandhi's movement in India.⁹² He constantly urged FOR members to form cells to explore the implications of nonviolence for transforming both the political status quo and their daily lives. One of the most well-known cells was the Harlem Ashram, founded by J. Holmes Smith, the former missionary to India. Members of the ashram dedicated themselves to a serious study and practice of Gandhian nonviolence. Their "bibles" were Muste's *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, and Krishnalal Shridharani's *War Without Violence*. Shridharani, an Indian national and a student at Columbia University, had become a mentor to American pacifists interested in Gandhian nonviolence. His book, like Gregg's, aimed to demonstrate that nonviolent direct action was hard headed and realistic. Several other communities of young people dedicated themselves to studying and practicing nonviolence. These included Ahisma Farm, a cooperative near Cleveland that was modeled after Gandhi's training center for nonviolent living; and the Newark Christian Colony (later known as the Newark Ashram), which sought to put its nonviolent ideals into practice by serving the poor. Some of the men and women destined to play a major role in the pacifist movement of the postwar era—such

92. Muste to James Farmer and George Houser, June 4, 1943, series A-3, box 2, folder 1, FOR Records, SCPC. See also "Suggested Draft of 'Message' of FOR Conference," September 1942, series A-1, box 5, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC; and Muste Comments, Minutes of the National Council Meeting of the FOR, April 11, 1942, section 2, series A-2, box 3, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC.

as Dave Dellinger, James Farmer, and Bill Sutherland—joined these ashrams in the early 1940s.⁹³

Muste also urged the national council of FOR to appoint a committee on nonviolent action headed by J. Holmes Smith and to hire James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, George Houser, and Glenn Smiley as organizational secretaries. These men ultimately played a pivotal role in popularizing Gandhian nonviolence and putting it into action. While serving as race relations secretary, James Farmer helped to found the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942, an organization that was committed to building an interracial movement against racial discrimination and segregation, and that relied exclusively upon nonviolent direct action. FOR secretaries Rustin and Houser were also deeply involved with CORE. The latter served as executive secretary of CORE from 1945 to 1957, and both men conducted institutes on race and nonviolence throughout the country during the 1940s and 1950s.⁹⁴ Rustin would later serve as an important advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr.⁹⁵ The same can be said for Smiley, who, in addition to advising King, trained hundreds of civil rights activists in the tactics of nonviolent direct action.⁹⁶

93. Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939). For details on the Harlem Ashram, see James Farmer, *Lay Bear the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 149–51; and Lawrence Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 63–64. Charles Chatfield discusses Ahisma Farm in *For Peace and Justice*, 216. For details on the Newark Ashram, see David Dellinger, *From Yale to Jail: The Life Story of a Moral Dissenter* (Marion, South Dak.: Rose Hill, 1993; reprint 1996), 66. My oral histories with Dellinger and Bill Sutherland also provided information about the Newark Ashram. Dave Dellinger, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, February 9, 2001; and Bill Sutherland, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, April 1, 2000.

94. Farmer published a copy of his memo to Muste proposing "Brotherhood Mobilization," which ultimately became CORE, in *Lay Bear the Heart*, appendix. The best discussion of CORE during its early years remains August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

95. The most recent biography of Rustin is Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000). See also Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997); and John D'Emilio, "Homophobia and the Trajectory of Postwar American Radicalism: The Case of Bayard Rustin," *Radical History Review* (1995) 62: 80–103. All three sources attest to Muste's profound influence on Rustin's political, intellectual, and emotional life.

96. A recent article in *Peace and Change* shows how Smiley used his sense of humor as an element in nonviolent resistance. See Margaret Cavin, "Glenn Smiley Was a Fool: The Use of the Comic as a Strategy of Nonviolence," *Peace and Change: A Journal of Peace Research* 26, no. 2, (April 2001): 223–42.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Muste was unable to convince FOR to embrace fully Gandhian nonviolence. Despite his eloquence and popularity, many pacifists continued to argue that nonviolent tactics such as picketing, civil disobedience, and fasting were coercive rather than persuasive and therefore hindered rather than fostered reconciliation.⁹⁷ Some of those most committed to Gandhian nonviolence drifted away from FOR over the course of the 1940s, preferring to work within the War Resisters League, which had grown increasingly radical, or the Peacemakers, an organization founded in 1948 by pacifists committed to resisting the Cold War and to making their personal lives conform to their ideals.⁹⁸

These divisions between more radical and more traditional pacifists should not, however, be overstated. FOR continued to explore nonviolent direct action, ultimately serving as an important financial and strategic resource for the modern Civil Rights Movement. Thus, whereas pacifists once viewed Gandhian nonviolence with suspicion, by 1941 it had become an institutionalized component of American pacifism. Pacifists' tendency to view Gandhi and Asia in sentimental terms also declined. While they never developed a critique of Orientalism as such, their discourse rarely exhibited the religious and cultural biases that had initially precluded a more sympathetic response to Gandhi's ideas and the politics of anticolonialism. Finally, pacifist theology did not remain mired in Social Gospel idealism; as the example of Muste suggests, it evolved in ways that reflected a greater appreciation of human sinfulness. But pacifists insisted, with Muste, on the possibility of redemption and the obligation of perfection.

Thus, a variety of factors—specifically, the controversy over Matthews' resignation, Niebuhr's criticism, involvement in social reform, and interaction with Gandhi and his followers—colluded to force

97. See, for example, Muste to Harrop Freeman, May 8, 1942, series A-3, box 14, folder 16, FOR Records, SCPC, which indicates that the latter argued that there was an important distinction between protest and constructive work. See also Sayre to Muste, June 23, 1943, series A, box 11, folder 5, Sayre Records, SCPC, requesting that the Nonviolent Action Committee not use FOR's name in connection with a protest at the British embassy for Indian freedom.

98. For a discussion of the radical pacifist movement from 1941 through 1968, see Tracy, *Direct Action*. Marian Mollin discusses the Peacemakers in "Actions Louder than Words: Gender and Political Activism in the American Radical Pacifist Movement, 1942-1972" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 2000); and Scott Bennett discusses the WRL in "'Pacifism Not Passivism': The War Resisters League and Radical Pacifism, Nonviolent Direct Action and the Americanization of Gandhi, 1915-1963" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1998).

American pacifists to look at Gandhian nonviolence with new eyes. More so than ever before, they reached out to racial minorities and pacifists from different religious backgrounds. They also fostered alliances with revolutionaries in the third world, especially Latin America and South Africa. While the question of whether nonviolent direct action was coercive or persuasive would continue to surface, Gandhian nonviolence had made its way into the American pacifist community, albeit altered somewhat by American perceptions and needs.

