

Christianity, Dissent, and the Cold War: A. J. Muste's Challenge to Realism and U.S. Empire*

"If Dachau was a crime," peace activist A. J. Muste wrote in his 1947 book on the bomb, *Not by Might*, "then Hiroshima is a crime." He warned that, unless Americans repented of the "hideous sin" of atomic warfare, international control of atomic energy would remain a chimera. By dropping the bomb, Muste argued, the United States had "introduced a profound tension into international relations. We are suspected and feared, and we are ourselves suspicious and afraid. Presently we shall be hated—in some places we are already—unless we reverse our course."¹ Muste was indeed a prophetic figure, whose principled dissent and championing of civil liberties during the Cold War resonated with his contemporaries and remains prescient today. In particular, he offered an incisive analysis of U.S. foreign policy and a sharp critique of realism, which came to dominate Protestant and liberal circles after World War II. Muste believed that the arms race and the Vietnam War grew directly out of contradictions within realist thought as well as racist and nationalist assumptions that went unexamined by its practitioners. He drew on his religious faith to construct his own existentialist solution to the problem of anxiety in the nuclear age, one that bore moral witness to the practices and values of U.S. empire and that anticipated the New Left's confrontation with Cold War liberalism over the war in Vietnam. As this essay will show, his example demonstrates that Christianity shaped resistance as well as accommodation to the Cold War and reminds us that religion, like all powerful cultural constructions, is contested and politically versatile.

Muste's radical pacifism stands in contrast to the rise of Christian realism in American Protestantism during and after World War II. The reality of Hitler and nazism had convinced large numbers of liberal Protestants that sinfulness was so deeply rooted in the human heart and society that peace was an impossible ideal. While often critical of U.S. foreign policy, they tended to view the arms race and the Cold War as inescapable realities that could only be managed

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1. A. J. Muste, *Not by Might: Christianity, the Way to Human Decency* (New York and London, 1947), 18, 3. Paul Boyer provides an insightful discussion of *Not by Might* in *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York, 1985), 219–21.

and controlled through *realpolitik*.² Reinhold Niebuhr, the leading proponent of Christian realism, joined forces with more secular liberals like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to purge the Democratic party of its Left wing and reconfigure liberalism as the “vital center” where liberals and conservatives could achieve consensus. As Niebuhr argued in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, published in 1944, only a pluralistic democracy composed of delicately balanced conflicting interests could restrain the “idealism” of the “children of light” and the “moral cynicism” of the “children of darkness.” Such a balance was necessary because liberals failed to recognize the reality of power and self-interest in relations between classes and nations, while moral cynics sought power for its own sake without any reference to universal ideals of community and justice. Realists saw liberal naiveté at work in the “one-worldism” of the Democratic Left, and they spent much of the postwar era attacking the notion that it was possible to negotiate with the Soviet Union.³

As scholars have suggested, realism was a masculine construct of human and international relations in which only “hardness” and “toughmindedness” could withstand the insecurities and anxieties of modern life and the threat of being penetrated by utopian totalitarians.⁴ Such a view tended to feminize ethics and morality, which helps to explain why figures like A. J. Muste, who stood for accommodation, openness, and negotiation, were marginalized in the repressive atmosphere of the early Cold War.⁵ Certainly Niebuhr dismissed Muste as a hopeless idealist, and historians have unfortunately followed his lead by not

2. As a theory and practice of international relations, realism posits the struggle for power as an inherent characteristic of individuals and societies. It also holds that states must act in their national interest and that stability is best achieved through a balance of power. See Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York, 2003); Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge, LA and London, 1991); and Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA and London, 1986). For the rise of realism within mainline Protestantism, see Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (Berkeley, CA, 1960, 1988).

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York, 1944). See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: Our Purposes and Perils on the Tightrope of American Liberalism* (1949; Boston, 1962). On postwar liberalism, see Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985), and Steven Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947–1985* (New York, 1987).

4. See Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, MA, 2001); Frank Costigliola, “‘Unceasing Pressure for Penetration’: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan’s Formation of the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (March 1997): 1309–39; and Geoffrey S. Smith, “National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the Cold-War United States,” *International History Review* 14 (1992): 307–37. On gender and diplomatic history, see Emily S. Rosenberg, “‘Foreign Affairs’ after World War II: Connecting Sexual and International Politics,” *Diplomatic History* 18 (Winter 1994): 59–70.

5. For a discussion of how this preoccupation with masculinity may have been related to the militarization of American society, see K. A. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 515–45. For a discussion of the militarization of the United



Figure 1: A. J. Muste confronting military authorities at Mead Missile Base in Omaha, Nebraska in 1959. After being denied entrance, Muste led his fellow protesters in prayer and then climbed over the fence where he was promptly arrested and given a six-month suspended sentence. Photo courtesy of the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute, New York, New York.

giving Muste the scholarly attention that he deserves.⁶ Yet Muste was enormously important to the history of dissent and social change during the postwar era. As the titular head of the peace movement, he developed a distinct theory and practice of nonviolent resistance that pacifists and others would draw upon to protest racism, militarism, and U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Martin Luther King, Jr. commented, “The current emphasis on nonviolent direct action in the race relations field is due more to A. J. than to anyone else in the country.” “During all my work with Martin King,” civil rights leader Bayard Rustin reflected, “I never made a difficult decision without talking the

States, see Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, CT, 1995).

6. See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr to J. Edgar Hoover, April 8, 1957, in which he describes Muste as a “simple-minded” pacifist; document obtained from the Department of Justice under the Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts (FOIPA). Following Niebuhr’s lead, historian Donald Meyer describes Muste as an idealist who expressed the “pure, unmixed, unadulterated social-gospel soul.” This characterization not only ignores the fact that Muste’s theological orientation always retained elements of his Calvinist past, it allows Meyer to ignore the substance of Muste’s critique of realism. See Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*, 355–70.

problem over with A. J. first.”⁷ Muste was “the leader, prophet, confessor and gadfly to us all,” said peace and civil rights activist Glenn Smiley. Without Muste’s leadership, antiwar activists concurred, the coalition against the war in Vietnam would not have been possible.⁸

In many respects, Muste’s postwar career can be understood as an attempt to formulate a theological and political alternative to realism and the militarization of American society. Instead of accommodating himself to the “reality” of international tension and rivalry, Muste insisted upon the possibility of world community and peace. “The notion that there is . . . one law for the individual and another for society,” he wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr, “find[s] no support whatever in the Jewish-Christian scriptures.”⁹ Instead of the vital center, Muste offered individual commitment through civil disobedience as the path out of the anxiety of the nuclear age. As national chairman of the Committee on Nonviolent Action (CNVA) and the Spring Mobilization Committee against the War in Vietnam (MOBE), his oppositional form of Christian thought and practice grew increasingly influential as the Cold War dragged on. Indeed, try as he might, Niebuhr could not ignore Muste, and he and other realists would be forced to reckon with him throughout the Cold War era.

Muste’s opposition to the Cold War and his critique of realism as theology and political philosophy had their roots in the interwar period, when he confronted the contradictions involved in his espousal of pacifism and his desire for radical social change. Indeed, his countercultural vision shared many of Niebuhr’s concerns and preoccupations, which have been well documented, and can be viewed as part of a larger cultural debate about Christian vocation and the relationship between the individual and the state and between means and ends.¹⁰

Muste was born in 1885 in Zierikzee, a small town in the Dutch province of Zeeland. When he was six years old, his family immigrated to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where his father worked as a teamster for a local furniture factory. Church and the Bible figured prominently in Muste’s childhood, and, in 1909, he was ordained in the Dutch Reformed Church. Like many Protestants of his generation, he soon came under the influence of the Social Gospel, which forced a painful reassessment of the Calvinist dogma and biblical literalism in which he

7. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin quotes can be found in Nat Hentoff, ed., *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste* (New York, 1963), 18–19.

8. See Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste* (Philadelphia, 1981), 186, 200–201. See also “A. J. Muste, 1885–1967,” Special Supplement of *WIN: Peace and Freedom through Nonviolent Action* (1967), and special issue on A. J. Muste, *Liberation*, 12, nos. 6, 7 (September–October 1967), copies in A. J. Muste papers, Reel 1, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter SCPC).

9. Muste, *Not by Might*, 109.

10. For Niebuhr’s theology and politics, see Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*, and Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1985, 1996).

had been reared.¹¹ By the time the United States entered World War I, he had become a committed socialist and pacifist, beliefs that led to his forced resignation from his pulpit.¹² From then on his spiritual home was in the labor movement and other movements for social change rather than the church. As the director of Brookwood Labor College from 1921 to 1933, he was a central figure in the movement for workers' education; and, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he helped to spearhead the struggle to organize industrial workers as head of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action.¹³

During the early years of the Great Depression, when pitched battles between labor and capital encouraged many to believe that revolution was imminent, Muste became alienated from pacifism. In a 1928 article, he criticized pacifists for their efforts to dissuade workers from using violence in the struggle against capitalism, and contended that the economic system was the real source of violence and conflict in society.¹⁴ In 1929 he made a similar argument when he addressed the annual meeting of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization of prominent liberal Protestants that counted Niebuhr as a member of its executive council. The refusal by the organization to support unequivocally the right of labor to strike only further estranged him from pacifism and liberalism more generally.¹⁵

Muste discussed his growing disillusionment with Niebuhr, who would also break with the FOR over the question of violence and the class struggle.¹⁶ In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, Niebuhr criticized his fellow liberal Protestants for failing 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. He also argued that, in a society of competing interests, some level of coercion was necessary for creating social change, and he insisted that there was no meaningful distinction between violence and nonviolence, a position that led him to reject pacifism altogether. As for the relationship between the individual conscience and the realities of society, he called for a creative tension in which Christians would act as Hebrew prophets, invoking God's judgment, while at

11. See Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography" [1957-1960], reprinted in *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, ed. Nat Hentoff (New York, 1967), 14-38, and Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 3-18.

12. Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," 56. See also Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 19-23.

13. See Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," 55-77, 92-115, 132-54, and Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 32-48. See also Richard Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia, 1990).

14. Muste, "Pacifism and Class War" [1928], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 179-85.

15. See Muste, "Fellowship and Class Struggle," series A-1, box 5, folder 1, Fellowship of Reconciliation Records (hereafter FOR Records), SCPC.

16. Ironically, Muste may have exerted influence on Niebuhr's decision to break with pacifism, though there is no direct evidence to suggest that this was the case. See Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," 137.



Figure 2: A. J. Muste, circa 1930. Photo courtesy of the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute, New York, New York.

the same time recognizing that world community was ultimately an impossible achievement.¹⁷

Like Niebuhr, Muste's sharp criticism of his fellow pacifists presaged a willingness to condone violence in the class struggle. By 1932 he had become a Marxist-Leninist; his Conference for Progressive Labor Action, which renamed itself the American Workers' Party, merged with the Trotskyists in 1934 to become the Workers' Party of the United States, with Muste as national secretary. Muste quickly grew to regret the merger, finding the dishonesty, duplicity, and infighting exhibited by his comrades deeply distressing. While vacationing in Europe during the summer of 1936, he entered the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris where he was overwhelmed by the feeling of inner peace. When a voice spoke to him "This is where you belong, in the church, not outside of it," he vowed to break with Trotskyism and re-dedicate his life to Christianity. This mystical experience also became the basis for his return to pacifism, the community from which he would develop a philosophy of revolutionary nonviolence

17. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932; reprint 1948), xx, 172. See also Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 84.

that would profoundly shape the history of the peace movement as well as the Left as a whole in the Cold War era.¹⁸

Muste went public with his return to pacifism soon after returning from Europe. In dozens of articles and speeches, he argued that the reason the Left was rent with sectarianism was that it had accepted the “spirit and methods” of the economic system it hoped to replace. Just as industrial capitalism reduced human beings and their labor to the status of commodities, the Left subordinated individual freedom to the party or the nation-state. The “proletarian movement” had been corrupted by “the philosophy of power, the desire to humiliate and dominate over or destroy the opponent, the acceptance of the theory that ‘the end justifies the means.’ ” He concluded that once one assumed that “in some situations, you must forswear the way of love, of truth, must accept the method of domination, deceit, violence . . . there [was] no stopping place.”¹⁹

Muste traced the origins of this materialistic conception of human life to the Renaissance and the Reformation, which had helped to liberate human beings from the fetters of the Church. While the pursuit of human freedom was both necessary and justified, it resulted in individuals placing themselves at the center of the universe. But once people believed that there was no law or force higher than themselves, they became incapable of respecting their fellows and of living in community. Lacking faith in others, they soon lost faith in themselves and became pawns of totalitarian systems. Until people recognized that “systems and institutions exist for man, not man for institutions,” the trend toward totalitarianism in modern life would continue. Drawing on his Calvinist heritage, Muste called for radicals to submit to God—or, for nonbelievers, to submit to a moral code—as a way of preserving a sense of the spiritual value of all human beings and the democratic character of the Left.²⁰

Muste’s argument was not entirely unique to him. Indeed, it owed much to his background in the Trotskyist movement, which was profoundly suspicious of the bureaucratic state and corporate liberalism.²¹ It also drew upon the revival of

18. See Muste, “Sketches for an Autobiography,” 132–54, 162–74; and A. J. Muste, “Return to Pacifism,” *The Christian Century*, December 2, 1936, reprinted in Hentoff, *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 195–202. For a secondary account of his conversion experience and its meaning for his career, see Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 64. For a more thorough examination of Muste’s theory of nonviolent social change, see Leilah Danielson, “‘In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi’: American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72, no. 2 (June 2003): 361–88.

19. Muste, “Return to Pacifism,” 199–201.

20. A. J. Muste, untitled speech dated 1941, A. J. Muste papers, Reel 3, SCPC; A. J. Muste, “The Foundations of Democracy,” transcript of an article or speech, circa 1938, A. J. Muste papers, Reel 4, SCPC. See also A. J. Muste, “The World Task of Pacifism” [1941], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 215–33.

21. For a brief discussion of the anti-Stalinist Left, see Michael Denning, “New York Intellectuals,” *Socialist Review* 88, no. 1 (January–March 1988): 136–47. See also Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987).

orthodoxy within Protestant circles in the late 1930s, represented most dramatically by Niebuhr, who criticized the Enlightenment view of human nature and sought to replace it with a more orthodox Christian view that recognized that there were “social forces that shape and limit human possibilities.”²² Yet whereas Niebuhr and other anti-Stalinists were on the way to becoming Cold War liberals, Muste used these ideas to develop a new radicalism based on Gandhian nonviolence, which he viewed as a synthesis of the Left’s commitment and pacifism’s respect for human freedom and attention to means.²³

In *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, published in 1940, Muste put forward his theological perspective vis-à-vis Niebuhr and his argument for nonviolent social change. According to Muste, the problem of the immorality of group behavior was indeed real, but the answer was not, as Niebuhr suggested, to condone this reality in the hope that prophetic appeals to God’s judgment would curb its excesses. The very “tension” emphasized by realists, Muste insisted, “exists only if the impossible demand of the Gospel [was] laid upon” individuals and nations alike. Indeed, in calling for pragmatic compromise with human limitations, the realists had actually renounced the prophetic tradition that they claimed was their inspiration. To suggest that history is a reenactment of “the ongoing conflict of the demonic and the divine” has “not the slightest warrant . . . in Jewish-Christian prophetism [sic]. In prophetism history has a goal: God’s reign of justice, fraternity, and peace.” Without a vision and without a goal, Muste predicted, realism would lead to defeatism and reaction.²⁴

Muste further pointed out that the decision by nonpacifists to compromise with evil by no means solved “the problem” of the relationship between means and ends. Once one gives up the standard of the gospel, “By what standard is our compromising to be measured and kept from being *too ‘realistic’*?”²⁵ This question was particularly relevant when one considered the total nature of modern warfare, which obviated just-war guidelines for proportional means and distinctions between combatants and noncombatants. Those theologians who think there is a middle ground between pacifism and total war are “unrealistic,” Muste asserted; “you are either for or against total war.”²⁶

Muste’s preoccupation with the relationship between means and ends became the basis for his exploration of Gandhian nonviolence as a method for

22. Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge, England, 1995), 1. See also Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*.

23. See Muste, “The World Task of Pacifism,” 222–33, and A. J. Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World* (New York, 1940), 175. The relationship between anti-Stalinism and Cold War liberalism has been explored by many scholars. See, for example, Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, 2000); Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*; and Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York, 1969).

24. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 33–34.

25. *Ibid.*, 37 (my emphasis).

26. *Ibid.*, 45.

social change. When the FOR hired him as national secretary in 1940, he attempted to transform the organization into a vehicle for building a mass “nonviolent direct action Movement” that reached out to “oppressed and minority groups such as Negroes, share-croppers, industrial workers . . . as Gandhi did in the India National Congress.”²⁷ In 1942, with Muste’s support, FOR Secretaries James Farmer and George Houser founded the Congress of Racial Equality, an organization of pacifists and nonpacifists dedicated to using nonviolent direct action against racial segregation and discrimination that would ultimately play a central role in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.²⁸

In terms of his ongoing debate with Niebuhr and their later differences during the Cold War, it is significant that Muste’s most dedicated supporters included a cohort of Niebuhr’s students at Union Theological Seminary, most notably David Dellinger and George Houser. In 1940, Dellinger, Houser, and six other students decided to refuse publicly to register for the draft in order to express their opposition to war and conscription. In an argument they would revive during the Cold War, they explained their refusal to register for the draft in terms of a struggle against a creeping American “totalitarianism.”²⁹ Muste, along with his friend Evan Thomas (brother of Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas), protested the incarceration of the young war resisters as an attack on the right of conscience: “In a day when all over the world the freedom of the individual is being crushed . . . it is an ominous thing if our nation also imprisons men of unquestioned integrity . . . who act in obedience to conscience and from profound religious conviction.”³⁰ Muste followed up his support for the “Union Eight” by refusing to comply with the president’s order on April 27, 1942, that all men up to sixty-five years of age register for the draft.³¹

For Niebuhr, on the other hand, the right of conscription was inherent in government and he accused the Union Eight of courting martyrdom and expressing anarchist contempt for the rule of law.³² In a spirited exchange of

27. Muste, “The World Task of Pacifism,” 223–25. See also Muste to James Farmer and George Houser, June 4, 1943, series A-3, box 2, folder 1, FOR Records, SCPC, and Muste, “Suggested Draft of ‘Message’ of FOR Conference,” September 1942, series A-1, box 5, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC.

28. James Farmer published a copy of his memo to Muste proposing “Brotherhood Mobilization,” which ultimately became the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), in James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1985), 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, IL, 1975). See also Danielson, “In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi,” 385–86.

29. Statement by Meredith Dallas et al., October 10, 1940, series A-3, box 12, folder 2, FOR Records, SCPC.

30. Evan Thomas and Muste statement, November 14, 1940, series A-3, box 12, folder 7, FOR Records, SCPC.

31. See list of older nonregistrants, circa April 1942, series A-3, box 12, folder 7, FOR Records, SCPC.

32. See Niebuhr to DeWitte Wyckoff, November 18, 1940, series A-3, box 12, folder 2, FOR Records, SCPC.

letters, Muste took issue with Niebuhr's characterization of the young men, arguing instead that they represented the best of the American democratic tradition. The Founding Fathers opposed a "large standing army" because they believed that peacetime armies undermined democracy. Moreover, by questioning the Union Eight's right to resist war, Niebuhr left little option beside "violent revolution" for people to resist "fascism . . . and to build a more decent social order." Niebuhr responded by disputing Muste's claim that the United States was on the verge of totalitarianism, pointing out that its representative structure made it far less coercive than a fascist state. He also accused "absolutists" of being intellectually confused, of not knowing whether they were refusing to register for the draft because they opposed the war or because they wanted to obtain better provisions for conscientious objectors. The final letter from Muste demonstrated how deep the chasm between the two men had become. He concluded that, if Niebuhr failed to recognize how conscription violated freedom, "your course contributes to the destruction of our civilization, and that it is not in accord with the highest Christian insights."³³

Muste's conviction that World War II would lead to domestic fascism grew over the course of the war. He blasted the War Powers Act of 1941 for giving the president the unprecedented authority to censor all news and information, limit civil liberties, and seize property owned by foreign nationals, and he condemned the internment of Japanese Americans as a blatant violation of civil rights. He also vigorously opposed the various proposals introduced by Congress over the course of the war that would have further circumscribed civil liberties, such as plans for the conscription of women and a permanent peacetime draft.³⁴ He was a vocal opponent of Allied use of obliteration bombing, noting that the nature of modern warfare tended to eradicate distinctions between the Allies and the fascist powers.³⁵ He viewed the atomic bombing of Japan as a confirmation of this analysis. As he asserted in *Not by Might*, the specter of "total, global, atomic war" had rendered the just-war tradition of the Christian Church obsolete.³⁶

As Paul Boyer argues in his classic history of the atomic bomb and U.S. culture, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, Muste's "eloquent manifesto posed profound dilemmas for the nonpacifist Christian who held with the just-war tradition that some conflicts were morally justifiable, and who believed that World War II fell

33. Muste to Niebuhr, December 23, 1940; Niebuhr to Muste, December 26, 1940; Muste to Niebuhr, December 31, 1940; all in series A-3, box 12, folder 2, FOR Records, SCPC.

34. See Muste, "Suggested Draft of 'Message' of FOR Conference," circa September 1942, series A-1, box 5, folder 3. See also memo on "Japanese American Evacuation," from national secretary to FOR members [Muste was national secretary of FOR], March 24, 1942, series A-3, box 13, folder 17; Muste to Paul Comly French, June 1, 1943, series A-3, box 12, folder 11; and Muste to editor of the *New Republic*, September 6, 1944, series A-3, box 12, folder 12; all in FOR Records, SCPC.

35. See "Religious and Educational Leaders Issue Statement on the Atomic Bomb," August 20, 1945, series A-3, box 6, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC. See also Muste, *Not by Might*, 15–17, 162.

36. Muste, *Not by Might*, 159.

in this category, but who recognized that it had ended in an orgy of killing almost beyond restraint or limit.”³⁷ Niebuhr, for example, initially agreed with the Federal Council of Churches that the surprise attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were “morally indefensible,” but soon thereafter justified their use as having shortened the war.³⁸ As Boyer shows, the public dialogue that emerged after the war about the moral, ethical, and political challenges posed by atomic weapons quickly subsided, due in large part to the emergence of the Cold War and the U.S. government’s desire to promote a positive image of the atom. The campaign for international control of atomic energy and world government also foundered in the face of worsening relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.³⁹ This essay extends Boyer’s analysis beyond the immediate postwar years and shows that Muste never retreated from the theological and political positions he took in 1945–1947, and that they served as the basis for his trenchant critique of U.S. foreign policy and his commitment to civil disobedience against the Cold War state. Although politically marginal in the years 1947–1956, Muste’s ideas circulated widely in Protestant and Left-wing circles, and became increasingly influential as the Cold War consensus broke down.

The containment policy of the Truman administration marked the triumph of realist views of the Soviet Union and international relations. In his famous “Long Telegram,” George F. Kennan argued that the Soviet government was pathologically bent on exerting “insistent, unceasing pressure for penetration and command” over Western societies. Only isolation and containment by expert diplomats could prevent the spread of this “malignant parasite.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Niebuhr, as a leader in the newly formed Americans for Democratic Action, argued that the tyrannical nature of the Soviet government meant that there was scant possibility of genuine international cooperation, and he dismissed the notion of a federal world government as yet another manifestation of liberal idealism.⁴¹ In true realist fashion, Niebuhr believed that the United States had to be willing to risk war if it were to maintain its position in Europe.⁴²

37. Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 220.

38. Niebuhr quoted in Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 43. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Atomic Bomb,” *Christianity and Society* (Fall 1945), reprinted in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Gloucester, MA, 1976), 233. Also in contrast to Muste, Niebuhr condoned obliteration bombing. See Reinhold Niebuhr, Lead Editorial, *Christianity and Crisis*, March 9, 1942, 2, and Lead Editorial, *Christianity and Crisis*, August 10, 1942, 1.

39. Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 291–351.

40. George Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” quoted in Costigliola, “Unceasing Pressure for Penetration,” and in Anders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 49–50.

41. See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Anglo-Russian Pact,” *Christianity and Crisis*, June 29, 1942, in which he argues that the Russians subscribed to “a kind of religion which has sought to achieve its ends in opposition to the western Christian culture and civilization,” 3.

42. Niebuhr, “The Fight for Germany,” *Life*, October 21, 1946, 65, 67. For a more detailed discussion of Niebuhr’s early Cold War activism, see Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*.

In positing the United States as the savior of “democratic civilization” against Soviet tyranny, Niebuhr always struck a reluctant, tragic note. Indeed, as Richard Fox warns, it is important not to exaggerate Niebuhr’s role as a Cold Warrior, as he frequently inveighed against American temptations to power and illusions of omnipotence.⁴³ Yet, as Campbell Craig has recently commented, if international politics was a struggle between aggressive totalitarianism and defensive democracy, “a battle in which the Children of Light would ‘have to play hardball’ if they were to survive, then it becomes difficult to see how Niebuhr could plausibly oppose anything the United States might do to prevail over the Soviet Union.”⁴⁴ Similarly, although Kennan became an incisive critic of U.S. foreign policy, his view of the Soviet Union as a “fanatical” regime and communism as “a malignant parasite” provided the ideological rationale for military policies he despised.⁴⁵

Before the onset of the Cold War, Muste’s views on the Soviet Union were quite similar to Kennan’s and Niebuhr’s. Like others with roots in the anti-Stalinist Left, Muste condemned the Soviet Union as a “totalitarian state” committed to expanding its power, and he found the prospect of a Communist-dominated world “terrifying.”⁴⁶ As tensions between the two superpowers grew, however, he recognized that such a view naturalized and de-historicized the Soviet Union, and became a justification for an expansion of American military might and the suppression of civil liberties.⁴⁷ Thus, while he would continue to criticize the Soviet regime, he also sought to historicize and contextualize it in hopes of promoting the mutual understanding that he believed was necessary for reconciliation. In a 1946 article, for example, he reminded Americans that Russian actions in Eastern Europe were “understandable”—albeit regrettable—in the context of Soviet history. The United States had intervened on the side of the White Army during the Russian civil war. It now had “a bigger Navy than all the other navies put together, a dominant Air Force, and atomic weapons.” In this respect, Muste argued that the United States had made a “mistake” in keeping the bomb a secret from Stalin at Potsdam, especially because “there was not military necessity” for its use. As a result, the Russians interpreted the bomb as an aggressive attempt to take the glory for ending the war, to stop the Russian forces in Manchuria, and to impress the world with

43. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 333. For an example of the way in which Niebuhr criticized the United States for its arrogance and self-righteousness, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “We Stand Alone,” *Christianity and the Crisis*, September 21, 1953, 113–14.

44. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 79.

45. See Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*. For a discussion of the ways in which Cold Warriors viewed communism as a disease, see Smith, “National Security and Personal Isolation.”

46. See, for example, A. J. Muste, “The Spiritual Menace of Russian Communism,” *Fellowship* 10, no. 6 (June 1944): 104–5.

47. Stephanson discusses the ways in which Kennan’s “historicist perspective tends paradoxically to eradicate the historical itself.” See Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, 40, 70–75.

American military might. Moreover, from the Russian point of view, Americans were hypocritical in calling the Soviet Union “aggressive and imperialistic” when the “United States has a Monroe Doctrine for the Americas, the Atlantic is dominated by the United States, and now the United States is claiming unilateral control of Pacific bases.”⁴⁸

In addition to challenging realist views of the Soviet Union, Muste disputed realist claims that containment and preponderant military power would assure collective security. With remarkable prescience, he warned that an arms buildup in the context of the atomic age made the world profoundly insecure, as other nations would soon enter “an atomic armament race” in order to catch up with the United States. Moreover, the proliferation of atomic weapons would increase the likelihood of a war with no guarantee of an American victory. Even if the United States should win such a war, it would be a hollow victory in which the “values associated with the United States” would not survive. It seemed to Muste that “the very means the nations use to provide themselves with . . . ‘defense’ and ‘security’ constitute the greatest obstacle to the attainment of genuine or permanent collective security.”⁴⁹

Muste was also dubious about claims that containment would prevent the spread of communism, particularly in the context of the revolutionary “upsurge” in the Third World. The United States had been pursuing a policy of “firmness” since the Bolshevik Revolution, a policy that had actually increased Soviet intractability and anti-Western resolve. Moreover, containment would inevitably place the United States on the side of reactionary elites; he predicted that the United States would “try to stem [nationalist] revolts . . . and [resort to increasingly] desperate measures to defend its power position and to eliminate its great foe, Russia.” It would not “satisfy the aspirations of the so-called backward peoples, [would] seek to slow down if not destroy their revolutions, [would] strive to control their economies for capitalist purposes.” This policy, rather than preventing communism, would actually make it more appealing to the Third World, which was essentially revolting “against the West.”⁵⁰

Finally, Muste believed that realism, despite its claims to the contrary, was an ideology based upon the assumption that the United States and Western Europe were exemplars of democracy and freedom. The United States had “a theoretical or formal democracy in political life—one man one vote.” But Americans were “not free in their economic life. White imperialism is not democratic. Our

48. A. J. Muste, “On Understanding Russia,” *Fellowship* 12, no. 11 (December 1946). See also Muste’s denunciation of the Red Scare in “Communism and Civil Liberties” [1948], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 322–30. In light of Muste’s later appeal to New Left activists, it is significant that his argument anticipates the thesis put forward by New Left scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. See, for example, Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York, 1965, 1994).

49. Muste, *Not by Might*, 6–7, 38.

50. A. J. Muste, “Problems of Non-Violent Revolution,” *The Peacemaker*, March 1, 1952.

American racist practices are not democratic.”⁵¹ If the Soviets had undermined the Atlantic Charter by dominating Eastern Europe, then the same was true of Britain and France, which had refused to give up their empires, and the United States, which insisted on maintaining its “sphere of influence” in the Western Hemisphere.⁵² As he wrote of the 1945 UN conference in San Francisco, “Each [of the big three] is pursuing a nationalist, isolationist policy, mapping out spheres of influence, seeking to build up its own power and ‘security.’”⁵³ He predicted that U.S. foreign policy in the postwar world would reflect the “combination of isolationism and neo-imperialism” that he saw at the conference.⁵⁴

Muste’s conviction that the United States and the West were at least as responsible as Russia for the emerging Cold War led to a confrontation with John Foster Dulles in the summer of 1946, a confrontation that reveals the nationalist assumptions behind U.S. foreign policy. As head of the Federal Council of Churches and future secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration, Dulles was not so much a realist as a “priestly nationalist,” as one biographer puts it, and realist criticism of his excessive moralism and nationalism is well known.⁵⁵ But it is also crucial to recognize, as Muste did, that these were differences over tactics, not aims; both Kennan and Niebuhr believed in the superiority of liberal democracy and were committed to extending its influence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Muste chided Niebuhr, “In essential matters—support of the Marshall Plan, the need of fighting communism and Russia by both military and ‘peaceful’ means, your political position today cannot be distinguished from that of John Foster Dulles.”⁵⁷

In a spirited exchange of letters, Dulles took issue with Muste’s attempt to “explain Soviet methods as being due to fear of us and of our atomic bombs. Resort by Soviet leaders to . . . forceful coercion has been characteristic [of them] for nearly 30 years.” The United States, by contrast, had “rarely resorted to intolerant methods in the sense of forcibly eradicating people who disagreed with our political system.” Muste replied by pointing out that the United States had been an “expansionist” nation throughout “most of its history.” “We did not resort to tolerant methods in dealing with the Indians. . . . We were not tolerant

51. A. J. Muste, “Contemporary Role of Russia and Stalinist Communism,” draft of chapter 2 for *Not by Might*, Reel 4, A. J. Muste papers, SCPC.

52. Muste, “Is Our Only Hope Dumbarton Oaks or Chaos?,” *Fellowship* 11, no. 4 (April 1945).

53. A. J. Muste, “Power Politics Threatens Peace but There Is a Way Out,” *Fellowship* 11, no. 6 (June 1945).

54. A. J. Muste, “What Lies Ahead?,” *Fellowship* 11, no. 2 (February 1945).

55. Mark G. Toulouse, *The Transformation of John Foster Dulles* (Macon, GA, 1985). For a discussion of the realist critique of Dulles’s foreign policy, see Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 101–7. See also Smith, *Realist Thought*, 124, which discusses Niebuhr’s criticism of Dulles.

56. See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 231–32, and Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, 79–99.

57. A. J. Muste, “Theology of Despair” [1948], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 303, 305.

in our war against the Filipinos or in seizing the Panama Canal. We would not tolerate any possible rival to the north or south of us.”⁵⁸

The disagreement between Muste and Dulles over U.S. history suggests that, when policymakers posited the United States as the representative of democratic civilization, they effectively erased the history of racism in the United States and the history of Western imperialism. As scholars such as Thomas Borstelmann have shown, the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union for global hegemony exposed the paradox of race and empire at the heart of Western democracy.⁵⁹ Indeed, Muste believed that racial and national chauvinism prevented Americans from recognizing the belligerency of U.S. foreign policy. Was it not time, Muste asked rhetorically, for Americans to develop “a modicum of objectivity and humility and stop thinking that we and our preponderant might constitute an exception among all nations and in all history? That, in other words, we are the master race, the *Herrenvolk*, the supremacy all men will, and must, hail with delight?”⁶⁰

As suggested above, Dulles’s strategy of “massive retaliation” and “rollback” of Communist gains under Eisenhower’s administration provoked intense criticism from realists, who viewed it as excessively provocative and inflexible. Instead, they advocated “deterrence,” the theory that mutually assured destruction would preclude nuclear war and perhaps even make an arms control agreement possible. This strategy “was somewhat paradoxical,” as Joel Rosenthal has noted, because it called for an arsenal of hydrogen bombs and “a war-fighting strategy that would exclude this weapon.”⁶¹ In a 1954 essay for *Christianity and Crisis* magazine, as well as in numerous other forums, Muste offered a similar analysis. “An armaments race is not in any basic . . . sense a deterrent but the opposite,” Muste wrote. The “*fear* engendered by the awful nature of modern weapons” was more likely to induce “suspicion, bitterness, recrimination, hysteria,” not bring the Soviets to the negotiating table in any meaningful sense. Brandishing nuclear weapons would also serve to alienate Africans and Asians, “who probably believe we would never use atomic bombs except on colored people.” Indeed, in the context of American military bases in Japan and military aid to Indochina, Third World peoples were likely to view the United States “as

58. Dulles to Muste, June 17, 1946; Muste to Dulles, July 1, 1946, series A-3, box 1, folder 9, FOR Records, SCPC.

59. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). See also Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); Penny von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1997); and Gerald Horne, “Who Lost the Cold War?: Africans and African Americans,” *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1996): 613–26. Anders Stephanson offers a perceptive critique of Kennan’s inability to recognize “how Western interests too could be conceived in terms of spheres and expansionism.” See Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, 38.

60. Muste, *Not by Might*, 4.

61. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 90. For Niebuhr’s advocacy of no first use, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Hydrogen Bomb,” *Christianity and Society* (Spring 1950), reprinted in Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, 235–37.

a military interloper in Asia, the 'new imperialism.' ” Moreover, Muste queried, “On what ethical or Christian ground can the *threat* of H-bomb war, in the *absence of any intention to carry it out*, be justified?”⁶²

Indeed, Muste believed that most arms control and disarmament proposals were “unrealistic because no account is taken . . . of what it would take to get disarmament.” Genuine disarmament would fundamentally challenge the “very nature” of the capitalist and Communist power blocs. It would, for example, “completely cut off the war economy” of the United States.⁶³ The notion of coexistence, which gained ground in liberal circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was equally “unrealistic.” While he certainly welcomed a relaxation of tension, he doubted that it would last in the context of an extremely fluid and dynamic international situation, especially “with all the changes taking place in former colonial countries.”⁶⁴ He also doubted that coexistence would last unless it was accompanied by fundamental economic and political reforms in both the United States and the Soviet Union. Otherwise, the capitalist quest for markets would continue to drive American expansion overseas and guaranteed that Communist nations would put up resistance. As he commented in the spring of 1954, there was “no historical basis” or evidence to support the proposition “*that two economies, as different as Russian Communism and American capitalism, can live together peacefully and in a continuous relationship.*”⁶⁵

As the foregoing discussion suggests, Muste often seemed more “realistic” than the realists in his assessment of the intractability of the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Muste shared realist skepticism about world government and the United Nations as mechanisms for obtaining peace and understanding. Echoing Niebuhr, he frequently remarked that world government could not “be established by legal or constitutional fiat. Community creates government, and there is no world community.”⁶⁶

Yet Muste differed from realists in one crucial respect: despite his calls for “common sense and realism,” he did not believe that they “were our first and greatest need.”⁶⁷ As he wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr, for Christian realists to pronounce judgment and doom on Americans for their atomic hubris without also calling on them to “repent, act and so flee from that judgment” allowed socialists and liberals to make their peace with war.⁶⁸ The role of a prophet was not only to invoke a realization of God’s judgment but also to offer the possi-

62. A. J. Muste, “The H-Bomb as Deterrent,” *Christianity and Crisis*, June 14, 1954, 77–79. See also A. J. Muste, “Niebuhr on the Brink of War,” *Liberation* 2, no. 12 (February 1957).

63. A. J. Muste, transcript entitled “The Nature of Our Crisis,” April 1954, A. J. Muste papers, Reel 4, SCPC.

64. A. J. Muste, “The Eisenhower-Khrushchev Talks,” *Liberation* 4, no. 6 (September 1959): 8–11.

65. Muste, “The Nature of Our Crisis.” Emphasis in original.

66. Muste, *Not by Might*, 38. See also A. J. Muste, “World Government: Panacea or Promise?,” *Fellowship* 12, no. 10 (November 1946): 177–78.

67. Muste, “Is Our Only Hope Dumbarton Oaks or Chaos?,” 69.

68. Muste, “Theology of Despair,” 303, 305.

bility of escape from that judgment through repentance. Instead of realism, what the world desperately needed was “faith and hope” that it was possible “to build a just and durable peace” and thus create the sense of community that was a prerequisite for a new, more peaceful, world order.⁶⁹

To fully understand Muste’s dissent, it is necessary to return to his analysis of the atomic bomb. Muste believed that the atomic bomb was the culmination of the existential crisis wrought by modernity that he had described in his 1940 book, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*. As he wrote in December 1945, the bomb was the “end-product of an age of mechanism, of power, of mass-action, of totalitarianism, an age which looked down upon the individual and placed its faith in systems.”⁷⁰ The Fordist organization of atomic production that led to the construction of the atomic bomb exemplified the “depersonalization and mechanization” of modern societies. But the bomb did not exist outside of human history; it was, Muste wrote, “the result of a distortion . . . that modern man should believe in . . . the reality of the machine but not conceive of either the builder or the tender of the machine as equally and indubitably real.”⁷¹

Muste’s comments about how mass production and ideology “distorted” reality suggest that he continued to draw upon Marxist thought even as he rejected its materialism. The Western Marxist tradition, as Perry Anderson has noted, has been preoccupied by concerns about superstructure and method.⁷² Muste, in terms evocative of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, believed that domination was maintained through a “supra-rational process of assent. . . . Government rests on the consent, not the subjugation, of the governed.”⁷³ He criticized Niebuhrian realists for exaggerating the role of force and violence in holding society together. Indeed, from Muste’s point of view, realism was an expression of the crisis of modernity rather than the solution to it.⁷⁴

According to Muste, the solution to this existential crisis was to restore faith in human agency and responsibility, a perspective that drew upon Christian notions of sin and repentance, suffering and redemption. As he wrote in *Not by Might*, by taking “personal responsibility” for the evils engendered by the bomb through civil disobedience, pacifists would force others to recognize that they shared responsibility for the current crisis, and would give them the courage to break with the conformity that characterized modern life. “The moment a man . . . acts as a responsible moral being and not a cog in a machine,” Muste asserted, “all

69. Muste, “Is Our Only Hope Dumbarton Oaks or Chaos?,” 70.

70. A. J. Muste, “Conscience and the Atomic Bomb,” *Fellowship* 11, no. 12 (December 1945): 209.

71. Muste, *Not by Might*, 43, 42.

72. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976; reprint London, 1979), 75–76.

73. Muste, *Not by Might*, 98, 101.

74. *Ibid.*, 100–102. See also Muste, “Theology of Despair,” 302–7.



Figure 3: A. J. Muste speaking to protestors who walked from the submarine base at Groton, CT to New York as part of a series of actions that CNVA undertook in the early 1960s to protest the deployment of the Polaris nuclear missile submarines. Photo courtesy of the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute, New York, New York.

doubts about the reality of his own existence vanish.”⁷⁵ Moreover, creative power was “released into human life, into history” when individuals courageously refused to subordinate their consciences regardless of the consequences.⁷⁶

In terms of national policy, Muste believed that the only way out of the nuclear stalemate was for the United States to take responsibility for introducing atomic warfare by abolishing the country’s atomic arsenal and placing atomic energy under international control. While he recognized that unilateral disarmament might invite Soviet aggression, he felt it was the only action that would signify genuine repentance for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Only by laying “down its life that mankind may live” could the United States become a force for peace:

It is clear that [calling for unilateral disarmament] is asking the nation to act upon the principle that he who would save his life must be willing to lose it, and to undertake a redemptive mission based on the faith that goodwill, or love, is the ultimate force in the universe. I believe that there is a very real possibility that a nation which had power and renounced it in this spirit

75. Muste, *Not by Might*, 56.

76. Muste, “Conscience and the Atomic Bomb,” 80.

. . . would by God's grace open a new and blessed era in human history. But I am certain that even if the United States should be attacked and crucified after having undertaken such a mission, it would still be better to disarm unilaterally. . . . To suffer terribly, and perhaps even to perish as a nation, after having undertaken a spiritual mission. No one who professes any belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition can doubt that the ultimate verdict of God and history would be with that nation.⁷⁷

Muste's ideas provided the strategic and ideological framework for the radical peace movement. The Peacemakers, a pacifist organization that was founded in 1948 (and chaired by Muste) to protest American militarism, took "personal responsibility" for the arms race by refusing to pay taxes or register for the draft and by engaging in collective acts of nonviolent protest at symbolic sites such as the offices of the Atomic Energy Commission. They believed that their example would provoke other Americans to recognize their complicity in the Cold War and the possibility for changing course.⁷⁸ The same existentialist perspective guided the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA), which was founded in 1957 with Muste as chairman; CNVA activists believed that nonviolent direct action was the only way that "moral concern and political conviction" could "cut through the mazes of a compartmentalized society, establish that personal confrontation and provide that personal example" that would give their fellow Americans a sense of their responsibility for the arms race.⁷⁹ They hoped that, as more and more Americans were converted, the nation would recognize that unilateral disarmament was the only way out of the Cold War. As one of their leaflets put it, "The most effective way to any disarmament today, we believe, is

77. A. J. Muste, "The Role of the Pacifist in the Atomic Age," *Fellowship* 12, no. 8 (September 1946): 15.

78. See Peacemaker pamphlet, dated 1949, Ernest and Marion Bromley papers, private collection, and "Call for a Conference on Civil Disobedience to the Draft," circa July 1948, Peacemakers box, SCPC. Among the founding members of the Peacemakers were Dave Dellinger, Dwight MacDonald, Bayard Rustin, George Houser, Bill Sutherland, and Milton Mayer. Secondary accounts of the Peacemakers and the rise of radical pacifism after World War II include Scott H. Bennett, *Radical Pacifism: The War Resisters League and Gandblian Nonviolence in America, 1915-1963* (Syracuse, NY, 2004); James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago, 1996); Marian Mollin, "Actions Louder Than Words: Gender and Political Activism in the American Radical Pacifist Movement (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2000); and Leilah Danielson, "Not by Might: Christianity, Nonviolence, and American Radicalism, 1919-1963" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2003).

79. "Report of the Committee on General Directions to the Executive Committee of CNVA," September 25, 1962, box 9, folder 150, Barbara Deming Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study (hereafter Deming Collection). As Doug Rossinow has persuasively argued, Christian existentialism was also an important influence on the New Left, which helps to explain why, as Maurice Isserman has put it, "pacifist leaders enjoyed a popularity among young radicals that far exceeded that of any of the surviving veterans of the Old Left." See Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York, 1998), and Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer . . . The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York, 1987), xiii.

for some nation to start scrapping its weapons. When one country disarms first, it opens the way for others to do the same. Some nation must find the courage to act first."⁸⁰ Without some measure of unilateral disarmament, they warned, the United States would not be in a moral position to demand that less powerful nations refrain from developing nuclear weapons.⁸¹

In advocating unilateral disarmament and supporting the nonaligned movement in Europe and the Third World, CNVA distinguished itself from other peace organizations, which tended to view either the United States or the Soviet Union as more or less responsible for the arms race.⁸² According to CNVA, taking sides or assigning degrees of guilt only contributed to the climate of mutual suspicion and distrust that fed the Cold War. Moreover, the arms race had reached such a point of irrationality and danger that neither side had clean hands; blaming the other only interfered with the imperative of making peace. This was why CNVA refused to join the World Peace Committee, which viewed the Soviet Union as occupying a purely defensive position. As Muste pointed out in a 1962 article, just the fact that the Soviet Union had an arsenal of hydrogen bombs affected the very nature of the regime and its relationship with other countries. It was "romantic, unrealistic, and un-Marxian," he asserted, "to assume that an arsenal of H-bombs is only so much hardware, the existence of which does not affect the very nature and structure of [the] state." At the same time, he criticized the American peace movement for its tendency to accept "American-centric" assumptions about the Cold War and the Soviet Union. Every peace movement, Muste declared, "must concentrate on truly liberating itself and in so doing liberate its adversary."⁸³

Muste's explicitly utopian language and vision should not obscure the practicality of his proposals. As commentators have noted, despite the numerous arms control treaties that have been signed since the 1960s, the trend toward developing more sophisticated weapons systems has continued.⁸⁴ In the 1970s, Kennan began to argue that disarmament talks were meaningless unless they were "accompanied by some measures of unilateral restraint." Thus, although he never supported unilateral disarmament per se, he recognized that unilateral arms reduction could serve as an "act of good faith" and thereby make genuine disarmament possible.⁸⁵ In his 1982 book, *The Nuclear Delusion*, Kennan

80. CNVA leaflet, circa 1961, box 1, folder 2, Deming Collection. For CNVA's emphasis on personal responsibility, see also Robert Pickus, "The Nevada Project: An Appraisal," *Liberation* 2, no. 6 (September 1957): 3-4, 19, and Albert Bigelow, "Why I Am Sailing into the Pacific Bomb-Test Area," *Liberation* 2, no. 11 (February 1958): 4-6.

81. See A. J. Muste, "Who Has the Spiritual Atom Bomb?" 486.

82. Lawrence Wittner provides an excellent overview of the peace movement and all of its diversity in his series *The Struggle against the Bomb* (Stanford, CA, 1993).

83. A. J. Muste, "Peace and the Power States," *Liberation* 7, no. 8 (October 1962): 16-19, 23. See also A. J. Muste, "Getting Rid of War: National Policy and Personal Responsibility," *Liberation* 14, no. 1 (March 1959): 5-8.

84. See, for example, Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 112-18.

85. Kennan, quoted in *ibid.*, 117-18.

sounded much like Muste when he wrote that the “readiness to use nuclear weapons against other human beings . . . is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity—an indignity of monstrous dimensions—offered to God!”⁸⁶ As Rosenthal notes, Kennan had begun to “abandon the traditional realist belief in small steps and began to argue for a ‘bold and sweeping departure.’”⁸⁷ So, indeed, had other realists; John C. Bennett, for example, head of the Federal Council of Churches in Christ and coeditor with Niebuhr of *Christianity and Crisis*, moved away from realism toward nuclear pacifism in the 1960s, largely because of Muste’s influence.⁸⁸

It was ironic that Kennan had adopted a position on nuclear disarmament that resembled Muste’s because the two men had a very public dispute in 1964, when Muste challenged the “realism” of Kennan’s analysis of U.S. foreign policy in Asia. In an article for the *New York Times* on November 22, 1964, Kennan had suggested that the United States had “not done too badly” in Asia and that it was necessary to place “limitations on the standards of our criticism.” Kennan had also suggested that the Chinese were “embittered fanatics, wedded to a dated and specious ideology” from which other Asians needed protection. While he counseled patience and pragmatism, he conceded that the ultimate objective was the “destruction of Communism as a political force in China and everywhere—the overthrow, in other words, of the Chinese Communist government.”⁸⁹

In an exchange of letters that was reprinted in *Liberation* magazine, Muste argued that Kennan’s analysis was based upon notions of national and racial superiority. The history of Western imperialism and of white supremacy was crucial for understanding Chinese ideology and foreign policy. Indeed, “Westerners, people ‘developed in the Judaic-Christian tradition,’ to use a phrase of Mr. Kennan’s by which [he implies] a certain moral superiority . . . , have certainly given Chinese and other non-Westerners many lessons in violence, brutality, and violation of human dignity.” He continued: “People who emphasize political realism ought to expect the new Chinese regime . . . to behave just as it does.” He found it “utterly appalling” that “a man of Kennan’s stature should exhibit the same blindness to the United States role that most Americans are afflicted with and that, for all his deprecation of ‘moralism,’ he should confirm America’s image of itself as by and large virtuous, innocent, only seeking to see that Communists are ‘contained’ and do not make trouble. This smugness and

86. George F. Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age* (New York, 1982), 207.

87. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 118.

88. Mark Hulsether provides an illuminating discussion of how Muste’s “devastating objections” to deterrence challenged realist thinking on nuclear weapons, and especially those of John C. Bennett. See Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993* (Knoxville, TN, 1999), 33. See also John C. Bennett to Muste dated March 26, 1960, A. J. Muste papers, Reel 7, SCPC.

89. George F. Kennan, “A Fresh Look at Our China Policy,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 22, 1964. See also A. J. Muste and George F. Kennan, “An Exchange: A Policy for the Far East,” *Liberation* 10, no. 2 (April 1965): 6.



Figure 4: A. J. Muste speaking at an anti-Vietnam War protest at the Pentagon in 1965. Through Muste's leadership of the Spring Mobilization Committee against the War in Vietnam, such demonstrations grew by the tens of thousands over the next several years. Photo courtesy of the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute, New York, New York.

self-righteousness means that the 'others,' the Communists, etc., are always the aggressors, fanatics, and sinners." What Kennan and American policymakers more generally had to recognize was that "the day of domination by any Western power" in Asia was "over!"⁹⁰

The debate between Muste and Kennan inevitably turned to the war in Vietnam. Kennan suggested that Muste's critique of the United States' China policy and calls for unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam amounted to isolationism. Without a U.S. presence in Asia, Kennan wrote, Asians would be left to the "mercies of . . . fanatical, power-hungry and wholly intolerant minorities." Muste responded by suggesting that it was precisely Kennan's characterization of the Chinese as fanatical and inhuman that made U.S. foreign policy imperialist rather than internationalist. "When is the moment to cease basing policy on the concept of opponents as 'embittered fanatics, power-hungry, and wholly intolerant' and to predicate [it] instead [on] their 'ultimate humanity and sobriety . . . the possibility that the adversary, too, sees . . . the identity of fate that binds us all?'" To equate withdrawal and an end to military interventionism with isolationism reflected "*our (bad) habit of thinking that the only relevant or 'real*

90. Muste and Kennan, "An Exchange: A Policy for the Far East," 6–8. Muste's argument anticipates Michael Sherry's suggestion that Americans perceived the threat of war as coming from "outside America to intrude upon their pacific ways." See Sherry, *In the Shadow of War*, ix.

relationship with other peoples is in the realm of 'power' and essentially military in character." Kennan conceded sadly that although the United States "had done little good anywhere," the only alternative was the admission of "complete failure and helplessness on our part."⁹¹

Within a year, Kennan would become a vocal opponent of the war in Vietnam, but not for the reasons Muste opposed it. According to Kennan, the war represented the mistaken application of national interest. He also doubted that Asian peoples were capable of democratic governance.⁹² The same was true of other realists who criticized the war. Hans Morgenthau, for example, argued that the war was a "consequence of a series of human failures and mistakes, and of a lack of greatness in our leaders, who refuse to admit the mistakes and liquidate a losing enterprise."⁹³ Niebuhr condemned the war as "futile," both because it reflected the "illusion of American omnipotence" and because Asian peoples lacked the cultural "pre-requisites for self-rule" and democratic government. Still, he maintained that the war was an "insoluble problem" in which there were few alternatives besides staying the course.⁹⁴

The main difference between realists and Muste was that the former continued to view Vietnam as a mistake, in contrast to Muste's view of the war as an expression of an overall "pattern" in U.S. foreign policy. They failed to recognize, as Muste did, the ways in which realism inadvertently led to the Vietnam War, both in terms of the logic of containment and in the ideas about race and nation that informed it. Realists, Muste wrote in *Liberation*, "[took] their places within the state and the culture, within the existing power structure, and then ask what is 'responsible' behavior within that context." But if the Christian churches served "as critics of the power-state and as revolutionizing leaven within the culture—as Negro churches of the South are doing . . . then how different the political situation might be. What new possibilities of international reconciliation might emerge!"⁹⁵

Muste's debates with "realists" suggest that to wrestle with the meaning of the atomic bomb and U.S. foreign policy was to wrestle with history. As Muste wrote in 1965, all of us "are trapped in the heritage of the past"—the Western heritage of equating power with the use of force and violence, and of subjugating "others" based on notions of racial, national, and religious superiority.⁹⁶ But Muste never viewed history as a burden. Central to his politics was a philosophy

91. *Ibid.*, 9–11, 24. My emphasis.

92. See Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, 173–75.

93. Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Ethics of War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," *War/Peace Report* (February 1967): 4.

94. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Vietnam and the Imperial Conflict," *New Leader*, June 6, 1966, 17; and Reinhold Niebuhr, "Vietnam: An Insoluble Problem," *Christianity and Crisis* 25, no. 1 (February 8, 1965): 1–2.

95. Muste, "Niebuhr on the Brink of War," 9–10.

96. Muste, "Who Has the Spiritual Atom Bomb?," 480.

of history as a joint project of human beings and God. Drawing parallels to his biblical namesake, Muste suggested that history began when Abraham left the city of his ancestors. By going out to find “a city which existed—and yet had to be brought into existence,” Abraham demonstrated that divinity was to be found in the history of human work and creation. For Muste, then, “the crucial thing about men, or societies, is not where they came from but where they are going.”⁹⁷ Indeed, it was precisely when “human communities” decided to “intervene in their own destiny” that history was made rather than lived.⁹⁸

Understanding Muste’s philosophy of history is crucial for understanding his radical politics and his opposition to the Cold War. He believed that if Americans—“especially white Anglo-Saxon Americans”—genuinely repented of their “sins,” then a “radically new approach” to relations between nations and people would become possible. As he wrote in 1965, “If a power like the United States voluntarily withdraws from the arms race and makes the changes in its own social structure which this entails, this would constitute ‘intervention’ of historic dimensions.”⁹⁹

This genealogy of Muste’s thought also highlights the role of Christianity both in the making of U.S. foreign policy and in antiwar activism.¹⁰⁰ While Christian realists provided ideological ammunition for the anti-Communist crusade, Muste and other pacifists drew on notions of sin, suffering, and redemption to challenge U.S. foreign policy. As this essay has shown, these differences grew out of a larger dialogue about the meaning of the prophetic tradition that began in the 1930s, when Muste and Niebuhr debated the relationship between Christian and secular society and between means and ends. As Muste wrote a fellow peace activist in the early 1960s, “Are prophets not needed in this age? Should prophets keep silence if they are unpopular and unheeded?” The “real world” was neither the “world of ethics, love, nonviolence” nor “the world of power.” Rather, these two worlds were in “perpetual tension,” a tension that only became creative “when, in [Martin] Buber’s phrase, ‘the plowshare of the normative principle’ is driven into the hard soil of political [reality], not when the plow is withdrawn from or blunted by the hard soil.”¹⁰¹

Moreover, just as a particular understanding of American national identity shaped realist thought, Muste’s dissent reflected his lingering hope that the United States could be a “savior nation,” one that could lead the world into an era of blessedness and righteousness. As he put it, the United States would only

97. Muste, “Sketches for an Autobiography,” 15, 27. See also A. J. Muste, “Saints for This Age” [1962], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, 414–15.

98. Muste, “Who Has the Spiritual Atom Bomb?,” 501.

99. *Ibid.*, 484, 501.

100. For a discussion of how Christianity shaped U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, see Seth Jacobs, “‘Our System Demands the Supreme Being’: The U.S. Religious Revival and the ‘Diem Experiment,’ 1954–55,” *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 589–624.

101. Muste to Lawrence Scott, circa January 1963, box 29, folder 581, Deming Collection.

realize its destiny when it was “willing to be crucified”—to lose “its life that mankind may live.”¹⁰² Peter van der Veer reminds us that the “belief in chosenness, the belief in rebirth or revival, and the hope for a savior are important for understanding the relationship between the notions of religion, nation, and race in the European sense.”¹⁰³ The belief in “chosenness” has served as a justification for American nationalism and hegemony,¹⁰⁴ but, as the example of Muste demonstrates, it has also served as a powerful critique of the nation-state and American power. Today, as evangelical Protestantism plays a central role in U.S. foreign policy, both as part of its ideological base and as a proselytizing force, it is important to remember that this has not always been so.

102. See Muste sermon for FOR National Conference in 1947, series a-1, box 5, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC. See also Muste, “The Role of the Pacifist in the Atomic Age.”

103. Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 7.

104. For discussions of U.S. nationalism, see, for example, John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995); and Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, *The Nationalist Ferment: The Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789–1812*, trans. Lillian A. Parrott (Columbus, OH, 2004). See also Jacobs, “Our System Demands the Supreme Being.”

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