“It Is a Day of Judgment”: The Peacemakers, Religion, and Radicalism in Cold War America

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On the morning of July 1, 1959, eighteen pacifists gathered outside one of the gates of the Mead missile base in Omaha, Nebraska, where they had held a week-long vigil. After a half an hour of silent worship, former minister A. J. Muste delivered a sermon calling on the United States to disarm, quoting Isaiah 6:1–13 and 30:13, 15–21. Another half an hour of silent worship followed. Then Muste, along with two others, committed civil disobedience by climbing over the gate, where they were promptly arrested for trespassing.1 “Omaha Action,” as pacifists called it, was one of many nonviolent demonstrations at nuclear installations and other symbols of American military might in the late 1950s; such demonstrations grew larger with every decade of the Cold War. As the above story illustrates, prayer, fasting, and civil disobedience were central elements in this emergent antinuclear culture. And yet, with the exception of studies of the Catholic Worker movement,2 scholars have largely ignored the religious underpinnings of antinuclear protest.3 Tracing the origins, development, and influence of the Peacemakers, a radical pacifist group founded in 1948, demonstrates the postwar peace movement’s religious roots and the ways in which pacifists engaged with and reflected larger trends in U.S. religious and cultural history.

The early years of the Cold War were a time of religious renewal as church membership rose to nearly 65 percent of the national population. Scholars and contemporary critics have questioned the depth of American religious commitment, noting that the dominant ethos of this Cold War religious revival was individual self-expression and personal development. As Leigh Eric Schmidt and Edwin Gaustad observe in their survey of U.S. religious history, the fierce anticommunist climate of the 1950s marginalized the liberal tradition of “spiritual combat, civic struggle, and social service.”4 Ironically, liberals themselves led the attack on this tradition.
Reinhold Niebuhr and other Christian realists charged that liberals had accommodated themselves too easily to modern, secular culture and argued that the role of the Christian was to rebuke modernity and stand against the world. Realism required a sharp differentiation between the sacred and profane and an acceptance that the ends could justify the means, including the reality and threat of nuclear warfare. In this narrative of liberal innocence and culpability, pacifists typically stand in as Niebuhr’s other, the liberals who remained wedded to notions of progress and optimism and who failed to appreciate the Soviet threat.5

In fact, pacifists, like other Protestants of their generation, shared the realist critique of Enlightenment modernity and the secular left. But whereas most American Protestants followed Niebuhr’s lead and identified the fate of Christianity with U.S. foreign policy,6 pacifists insisted that the United States, like the Soviet Union, was guilty of excessive secularism and materialism, manifest most alarmingly in the twin evils of conscription and atomic weaponry. With the guidance of A. J. Muste, those who identified as “radical pacifists” formed the Peacemakers, a group dedicated to engaging in “Holy Disobedience against the war-making and conscripting State.”7 Reflecting their essentially Christian worldview, Peacemakers believed that, by taking suffering upon themselves in individual and collective acts of civil disobedience, they would cut through the conformist culture of the 1950s and awaken their fellow Americans to their responsibility for the atomic and international crisis. With their themes of sin and suffering, repentance and redemption, the Peacemakers continued and elaborated the tradition of Christian activism and the religious left into the postwar era. Although they had scant influence on American policymakers or the public in the early years of the Cold War, widespread opposition to nuclear testing and U.S. foreign policy in the late 1950s and 1960s launched pacifists into leadership roles in campaigns for nuclear disarmament and peace, which allowed them to shape the culture of antinuclear and antiwar activism.8

A. J. Muste and the Pacifist Critique of Secular Modernity

The roots of pacifist radicalism lay in the interwar years. After World War I, pacifism spread beyond the historic peace churches to include mainline Protestant denominations. As peace historians have demonstrated, pacifist tactics evolved over the course of the 1920s and 1930s from individual war resistance to the use of collective nonviolence, based upon Gandhi’s principles of...
Few, however, have recognized the religious concerns that animated pacifists or the religious character of Gandhian nonviolence. For example, most accounts of Richard Gregg’s groundbreaking book, *The Power of Nonviolence* (1934), emphasize Gregg’s efforts to present “nonviolence as a realistic alternative to war and violence,” as one historian has recently put it. But it is equally true that Gregg grounded his argument in Social Gospel ideals and in Christian notions of the redemptive power of self-suffering. According to Gregg, the “basic assumption” of nonviolent resistance was that love was the dominant force in the universe and that all human beings were “at bottom decent.” Through expressing love and enduring suffering, nonviolent resisters hoped, in his words, to “convert the opponent, to change his understanding and his sense of values.” For Gregg, moreover, nonviolence was more than a method of social change; it was a way of life that reflected a profound critique of Western, secular modernity. As Joseph Kip Kosek has argued, Gregg “believed that Gandhi was developing a comprehensive counter-modernity, a more human alternative to Western civilization that would use modern scientific knowledge to create a simplified, decentralized, peaceful, and more ecologically balanced culture.”

Although Gregg’s ideas circulated widely in pacifist circles in the 1930s, it was not until 1941 that the Fellowship of Reconciliation (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. Muste’s influence on the pacifist movement and the left as a whole from 1940 (when he became secretary of the FOR) until his death in 1967 was profound. As the titular head of the peace movement, with a long history of involvement in the labor movement and the left, he was widely respected across the ideological and cultural divides of the liberal left. Like Gregg, Muste was a devout Christian who was attracted to Gandhian nonviolence both for its efficacy as a method of social change and for the challenge it posed to the values of Enlightenment modernity. Yet, unlike Gregg, who was a shy person with ascetic tendencies, Muste was first and foremost an activist with finely tuned organizational skills that reflected his almost two decades of experience in the labor movement and the left. By 1947, he helped to build a cadre of radical pacifists known as the Peacemakers, who were committed not only to nonviolent direct action but also to the spiritual regeneration of U.S. society as a whole.

Muste’s activist career had begun in the 1910s. While serving as minister of a well-heeled Dutch Reformed church in Washington
Heights, he had become estranged from the institutional church and pietistic notions of salvation. He eventually left the ministry, finding fellowship in the left wing of the Progressive movement, with its ethos of Protestant morality, civil libertarianism, and antimilitarism. Soon he was on the cutting edge of labor radicalism; the labor movement became, as he recalled, his “messiah,” destined to usher in the “brotherhood of man.” Yet the diverse and contentious world of working-class radicalism that he entered frightened and repulsed the community of Protestant liberals with whom he had found kindred spirits in Christian mysticism and pacifism. He remained alienated from Christianity and pacifism until 1936, when he had a powerful mystical experience that persuaded him to return to the church. “There is One God and One Lord Jesus Christ,” Muste announced in a 1939 article for the *Christian Century*. But those redeemed by Christ’s love must follow his example and “seek to redeem the world” nonviolently; by being “ever ready to die for sinners,” they would bring “salvation” to the world.15

Muste’s return to the Christian pacifist fold did not, however, signify an abandonment of his radical politics or his commitment to the labor movement. But he no longer considered the working class the revolutionary agent of social change nor did he believe that changing the system would automatically usher in a socialist utopia. “Today I recognize that [the left] neglected too much the problem of what happens inside the human being,” he wrote in the *Christian Century*. “Whether there can be a democratic society, for example, depends in the final analysis upon what human beings are, whether they are capable of making moral decisions and therefore of building and maintaining a free society.”16

This conviction grew out of Muste’s experiences as chair of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action from 1929 to 1933 and as national secretary of the Trotskyist Workers’ Party USA from 1934 to 1936. Despite the idealism, courage, and spirit of self-sacrifice that animated the “proletarian movement,” internal strife, backbiting, and dogmatism were rampant. The reason the left was rent with sectarianism, Muste reflected, 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. It 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.”

Muste traced the origins of this materialistic and mechanistic view of human life to the Renaissance and Reformation. While human beings had been liberated from the fetters of the church, he declared in his 1940 book *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, they had consequently placed themselves at the center of the universe. But when individuals usurped the role of God and believed that there was no law or force higher than themselves, they became willing to sacrifice other human beings and the present in the name of progress, the state, or the revolution. “Man whose spirit was to have been freed at last from ancient restraint and superstition has [never been] less free than he is today: a cog in a machine in our own industrialism; a pawn in the hands of a totalitarian state under Fascism; or the tool of a totalitarian party under Communism.” “We shall not recover our faith in democracy,” Muste warned in a 1939 radio broadcast, “save as we recover our faith in man; and we shall not recover our faith in man save as we recover our faith in God.” For Muste, then, religious conversion and pacifist commitment would preserve a sense of the spiritual value of all human beings and the democratic character of the left. “If we are to have a new world,” he asserted, “we must have new men; if you want a revolution, you must be revolutionized.”

In making this argument, Muste drew upon contemporary intellectual and theological currents. Anti-Stalinist intellectuals such as Ignazio Silone, Aldous Huxley, and Arthur Koestler impressed him with their calls for a revival of moral and spiritual values to regenerate and democratize socialism. Personalism and existentialism also shaped his thinking. “We must begin by realizing . . . that each man is a person, an end in himself,” he asserted time and again. And he cited philosophers Martin Buber, Nicholas Berdyaev, and Jacques Maritain to the effect that human existence is ultimately incomplete and paradoxical and that only through action, suffering, and struggle in spite of doubt and uncertainty was it possible to redeem the objective order and transform it into the spiritual order.

Neo-orthodoxy was another influence on Muste’s thought. In the United States, neo-orthodoxy is associated with Reinhold Niebuhr, who, beginning with his 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, entered a sustained attack on liberalism that continued through the Cold War. Muste concurred with much of Niebuhr’s criticism of the liberal tradition, particularly his argument that liberals had been inordinately optimistic and sentimental about human
nature and naïve in their faith in historical progress. But, in contrast to Niebuhr, he refused to accept coercion, violence, and the power of the state as inevitable and necessary correctives to humanity’s fallen condition. Moreover, though he too emphasized God’s transcendence and human dependence, Muste retained faith in an immanent God who entered into human history. “It seems to me,” Muste wrote, that in the “Christian revelation the Cross is the crucial event in history, our human history; that the concept of the Cross, of suffering love as supreme redemptive power, was a social concept, which was revealed to men who faced overwhelming and bitter historico-political and economic dilemmas as a way of meeting precisely such dilemmas.”

It is, thus, not surprising that Muste found Gandhian nonviolence so appealing. Most obviously, the method of satyagraha, in which suffering love serves as a crucible for reconciliation, resonated with his advocacy of the way of the cross and his insistence on the primacy of the person and moral values. But he was also drawn to Gandhi’s attempt to develop a more human alternative to Western materialism, industrialism, centralization, and materialism.

Notably, Muste’s intellectual and religious journey paralleled that of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Like Muste, Day had a long history of involvement in the secular left, but a religious conversion in the late 1920s had alienated her from radical politics. Through a chance meeting with Peter Maurin, an itinerant French peasant, she became familiar with the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum and the personalist movement in France. Typically associated with liberal Protestantism and particularly the theology of Boston University’s Borden Parker Bowne, personalism had its Catholic counterpart in the ideas of Emmanuel Mounier and his Esprit movement, which sought to construct an alternative to communism, on the one hand, and to the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, on the other. As historians have shown, Day consciously drew on this tradition when she founded the Catholic Worker movement in 1933. Like Muste, however, she interpreted personalism in pacifist and perfectionist terms, emphasizing the redemptive power of suffering. As she put it in a 1936 article in the Catholic Worker newspaper, by taking up the cross, “we may seem to fail, but we recall to our readers the ostensible failure of Christ when he died upon the Cross, forsaken by all his followers. Out of his failure a New World sprang up.” With its unique blend of pacifism and decentralism, doctrinal orthodoxy and antimaterialism, Day’s Catholic Worker movement represented a Catholic version of Muste’s radical pacifism.
The Student Christian Movement, World War II, and the Roots of Radical Pacifism

Just as Day found enthusiastic recruits in a younger generation of Catholics, Muste’s vision of a “non-violent direct action Mass movement” attracted Protestant youth who had been active in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of the interwar years. The SCM was a federation of Protestant youth groups and chapters of the YMCA that had been deeply influenced by the pacifist sentiment that swept through liberal Protestant circles after World War I. Indeed, the most popular clerical leaders of the SCM were either pacifists or sympathetic to pacifism. The vast majority of the men and women who would later identify as radical pacifists had first been politicized through their involvement in the SCM. For example, David Dellinger, who would become prominent in the Peacemakers and who would later become famous for being the oldest defendant in the Chicago Seven trial, was a leader in the SCM at Yale University in the 1930s. While attending a conference of the New England SCM, he met and became friends with Bill Sutherland, an African American who would also join the Peacemakers. A few years later, in the winter of 1941–42, Dellinger met his future wife at a national conference of the SCM in Miami, Ohio. Similarly, George Houser, a white student from Colorado, met James Farmer, an African American divinity student from Howard University, at one of the annual conferences of the National Council of Methodist Youth, which was affiliated with the SCM. Lula Peterson (who would later marry Farmer) and Marjorie Swann, who would become one of the most influential female members of the Peacemakers, met at Northwestern University, where they were active in the Young People’s Fellowship at the First Methodist Church in Evanston.

The ethos of the SCM was that the Sermon on the Mount was a literal guide to personal and political living. Swann recalled that her minister, Ernest Fremont Tittle, was an “ardent pacifist” who taught her that “it’s more important how we lead our Christian lives on earth than just trying to see that we get to heaven.”32 Dorothy Hassler, a student at Hunter College who would become active in the New York branch of FOR, recalled attending a Christian youth conference in 1935 in which she and the other conferees carried lit candles into a lake to symbolize their dedication to living their lives by the values of pacifism and inter-racialism.33 Wally Nelson, who would later identify as a “secular” pacifist and who would become a central figure in the Peacemakers, similarly recalled that, as a member of the SCM, he was “quite taken with the Sermon on the Mount.
and trying to make Christianity something more than just going to church.”

Eager to demonstrate that pacifism was politically relevant, these young Protestants rallied to Muste’s vision of building a nonviolent revolutionary movement. George Houser and James Farmer, for example, became secretaries of the FOR under Muste’s leadership. In 1942, working under FOR auspices, they founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization of pacifists and nonpacifists dedicated to using “nonviolent direct action” to fight racial segregation and discrimination; CORE would later become one of the most important civil rights organizations of the 1960s, and Farmer one of the civil rights movement’s most charismatic leaders. Glenn Smiley, a white Methodist minister, and Bayard Rustin, an African American Quaker and Muste protégé, also served as secretaries of the FOR during the 1940s. Both men later served as advisors on the use of creative nonviolence to Martin Luther King, Jr., which again illustrates that the cultural and political influence of the radical pacifist movement went far beyond its numbers.

Along with organizing CORE campaigns against racial segregation, these FOR secretaries helped to organize “cells,” such as the Harlem Ashram, the Newark Christian Colony, and Ahimsa Farm in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where members served the poor and studied and practiced nonviolence. The Newark Christian Colony, for example, “offered hospitality to anyone who came to our door, sharing whatever food and clothing we had as well as shelter.” It also had a small farm outside the city where members obtained food from two cows, twenty-four chickens, and a vegetable garden. Surplus vegetables were sent to Newark where they were sold at a cooperative store run by fellow members of the Colony. The spiritual atmosphere was quite intense; in addition to daily prayers and meditation, every Wednesday the Colony held a retreat during which members fasted. As Bill Sutherland, a self-described “Muste boy,” recalled of the Newark Christian Colony, “people were fascinated with a kind of Franciscan approach and they had all kinds of prayers in the morning and the evening.”

These experiments in personalism reflected young pacifists’ fears of the growing power of the nation-state and the militarization of U.S. society. Indeed, a popular antiwar argument in the 1930s was that American intervention would lead to fascism and dictatorship at home. Hence, when the federal government instituted the Selective Training and Service Act in 1940, many pacifist youth opposed it not only because they abhorred war but also because they viewed the new law as an ominous sign that the country was becoming increasingly
authoritarian. For example, while completing their divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, Dellinger and Houser joined six of their peers in refusing to register for the first peacetime draft in U.S. history: “It is a totalitarian move when our government insists that the manpower of the nation take a year of military training. It is a totalitarian move for the president of the nation to be able to conscript industry . . . for national defense.” By obeying God rather than the state, they hoped to strike “at the heart of totalitarianism as well as war.” In a highly publicized case, the so-called Union Eight accepted jail sentences rather than register for the draft.

Over the course of the war, as historians have shown, increasing numbers of pacifists would join the Union Eight in refusing to cooperate with Selective Service. The Selective Service Act had provided exemption from service for those who “by reason of religious training or belief” were conscientiously opposed to participation in war. The first and most popular option for conscientious objectors (COs) was to accept noncombatant service. The second was to perform “work of national importance” in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps under the supervision of the historic peace churches and established peace organizations. A third option was to refuse to register altogether and serve time in a federal penitentiary. Much like the Union Eight, COs who spent the war years in CPS camps and federal penitentiaries interpreted their experience as symptomatic of the growing presence of the state in all aspects of American society, and nonviolent resistance to CPS and prison authorities became widespread. For example, CO Caleb Foote wrote in Fellowship magazine that the problem with prison was not so much physical brutality but the “psychological torture” of isolation, separation from family, and the meaninglessness of daily existence. Such “de-personalization” made prisoners and former prisoners “fruit ready for the picking by the native fascist.” This was something that Americans failed to grasp: “An America sophisticated in thus transforming physical into psychological torture, which calls its concentration camps ‘relocation centers,’ finds this fact hard to understand.”

As COs like Foote became increasingly radicalized through their confrontations with prison authorities, they felt a sense of estrangement from older pacifists and established peace organizations that had cooperated with the administration of the CPS system. A letter from Dellinger and other imprisoned COs to the FOR in 1944 castigated the organization for being too deferential to law and the authority of the federal government and for failing to implement fully the program of nonviolent direct action initiated by Muste. They called upon sympathizers to join them in building “a working-class,
revolutionary, socialist movement, which will be true to the noblest emphases of religious pacifism.”

Ever alert to signs of revolutionary discontent, Muste obtained authorization from the FOR to sponsor a series of conferences on “the philosophy and methodology of revolutionary pacifism” which was explicitly directed at younger pacifists. The ensuing conferences, held in September 1944 and February 1945, were an important seedbed for the formation of the Peacemakers. Participants cited the Hebrew prophets, “the life and teachings of Jesus and the ‘Way of the Cross,’” and Gandhi as their models for personal and political action. They asserted that nonviolence was a worldview and way of life based upon faith in “the unity of all life.” Drawing explicitly on the writings of Berdyaev, Huxley, and Koestler, they argued that their affirmation of spiritual and transcendent values challenged the “prevailing materialism of the time” and “the erroneous notion,” held by left and right alike, “that rational thought alone could comprehend the nature of reality.”

Their political goals followed from their view of contemporary society as regimented and materialistic. While most of them conceded that the means of communication and transportation should remain centralized, albeit under government ownership and control, they argued that large-scale decentralization was necessary to “restore the individual to the autonomy he loses where authority is excessively delegated and rigourously [sic] centralized.” This attempt to achieve a balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group would serve as a model to their fellow Americans of the virtues of decentralism and simple living. It would also help to restore a sense of personal responsibility, which they differentiated from “rugged individualism,” “a perverted development of this value, isolating and exploiting other people.”

Pacifist use of the language of “personal responsibility,” which is typically associated with conservative thought, reflected the influence of Christian existentialism—and it is significant that excerpts from the writings of Paul Tillich and Søren Kierkegaard circulated at the conferences. By acknowledging their own complicity in evil, pacifists believed that they would create and reaffirm the existence of a moral universe and inspire others to do the same. As we shall see, these ideas would be at the center of pacifist radicalism in the postwar era.

The Atomic Bomb and the Birth of the Peacemakers

As World War II came to an end, growing numbers of pacifists had become convinced that the modern faith in reason, science, and progress had gone too far and that spontaneous acts of resistance
based on moral values was a revolutionary tool in this context. The explosion of two atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki only confirmed this analysis. Marion Coddington (Bromley), who served as Muste’s secretary and who would assume a prominent role in the Peacemakers, asserted that the bomb “was the inevitable product of an inhuman, competitive industrial order in which millions are brutalized by monotonous work.” She argued further that the task confronting pacifists was to find new ways to affirm their faith that “man is bigger than masses.”\(^4^9\) Similarly, the more conservative John Nevin Sayre, who served as the FOR’s international secretary, viewed the bomb as the inevitable consequence of the “coming of modern science and the dazzlement [sic] of men by the scientific method,” and he called for a new generation of “saints” eager to prove that the “spirit” too had power.\(^5^0\)

Of all pacifists, Muste offered the most sophisticated presentation of the argument that the atomic bomb was the logical outcome of the culture and values of modernity. No longer believing in God or the existence of a moral universe, human beings had come to doubt that their lives had any ultimate meaning. This alienation encouraged them to think of themselves as objects rather than as “responsible and creative spirits.” As a result, they located power in “the irrational forces of nature” and in “the machine” rather than in themselves. What exacerbated this sense of fragmentation and depersonalization was the bureaucratization and centralization of modern societies. The fact that many of the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project appeared not to know that they were building an atomic bomb exemplified “this process of depersonalization and mechanization.” For Muste, then, the bomb was the culmination of the existential crisis wrought by modernity. It was, as he put it in a December 1945 article, “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.”\(^5^1\)

Muste insisted that redemption would only be possible if human beings asserted their freedom against the depersonalization of modernity. In countless sermons, speeches, articles, and a book entitled *Not by Might: Christianity, The Way to Human Decency*, he argued that the solution to the atomic crisis was to assert the individual conscience against the bomb by refusing to register for the draft, refusing to pay income taxes, and otherwise not going along with the system. When individuals took “personal responsibility” for the evils engendered by the bomb in this way, they forced others to recognize that their feelings of depersonalization were not real—that they existed and thus shared responsibility for the current crisis. They also gave
others the courage to break with the conformity that characterized modern life. "The moment a man thus acts as a responsible moral being and not a cog in a machine," Muste wrote, "all doubts about the reality of his own existence vanish." Moreover, "soul power" was "released into human life, into history" when individuals courageously refused to subordinate their conscience regardless of the consequences.52

In making this argument, Muste paraphrased existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, who suggested that "great turning-points in human history"—kairos—came not from external actors like the state but when a group of people was "seized as a whole by the transcendental idea and for its sake renounces power. Such an event . . . would perhaps create ‘mankind.’" Power, in other words, involved "an element of renunciation of power" such as that expressed by Jesus on the cross.53 Thus, Muste hoped that, as more and more Americans were converted, the nation would take responsibility for introducing atomic warfare by unilaterally abolishing the country’s atomic arsenal. While 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 . . . 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 . . . 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.54

The above passage speaks not only to the existential character of pacifist radicalism but also to the ways in which it tapped into millennial notions of American national destiny. As Ernest Lee Tuveson pointed out many years ago, the notion of an American redemptive mission has a long history, one that has been intimately connected both with national chauvinism and social reform.55 The
close association between millennialism and reformism reached its height in the antebellum period when, as James H. Moorhead notes, “the postmillennial hope became the charter for more immediate, thoroughgoing and uncompromising efforts to alter the character of American society.” Like his nineteenth-century counterparts, Muste used the prophetic language of the jeremiad to alert his fellow Americans to their historic role: citing Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Universal,” he argued that the country could either become a “savior nation” by relinquishing its atomic arsenal or usher in the “apocalypse.” People throughout the world were asking whether the United States was “the incarnation of Satan, or is he indeed the symbol of Everyman, the Common People, who by the grace of God may at last inherit the Kingdom? Never in all history has a people been faced with such a responsibility and such an opportunity.”

Eager to build a movement committed to war resistance and unilateral disarmament, Muste worked with the Consultative Peace Council, a federation of pacifist groups, to organize a “retreat-conference on pacifist orientation and strategy.” The conference, which met in both May and November of 1947, would ultimately give birth to the Peacemakers. In a series of discussions and workshops, participants wholeheartedly agreed with Muste that “spiritual life and commitment” had to be at the center of any viable pacifist movement in the atomic age. Quaker Harold Chance commented that “reform at the political level alone . . . does not go deep enough to heal the hurt of our day.” But the goal of spiritual life was engagement, not retreat. As Chance put it, the purpose of meditation and prayer was not only to seek perfection but also to “expand the boundaries of the self.” When individuals commit themselves to God, Quaker theologian Douglas Steere commented, they begin “to seek fellowship. . . . Niebuhr says there are these two worlds: This inside world and the outside world, and there are different laws. That violates our fundamental belief.” This was why cells such as the Harlem Ashram and the Newark Christian Colony were so important. The fellowship and discipline imposed by cells helped prevent Christians from committing the greatest “heresy” of all: “separating the life of contemplation from the life of action.”

Although there was consensus on the importance of spiritual regeneration and cell organization as a foundation for pacifist action, the conference divided on the question of what precisely pacifists should do to overcome the stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union. As the minutes from the conference reveal, there was unanimity that, ideally, the United States should “take up the Cross” and unilaterally disarm. Americans had to recognize that
“no nation must wait until another nation acts, and that a special responsibility rests upon the United States to break the present deadlock of fear, distrust and self-righteousness” because it had dropped atomic bombs on Japan. If the universe was orderly it was also “characterized by spontaneity. It holds the possibility of new departures and of the release of hitherto untapped energies.” This meant that, when a people acted “in conformity with the laws of the universe” and took a leap of faith such as unilateral disarmament, “hitherto undreamed of spiritual power will be at their disposal.” Such a sacrifice “could be redemptive…. This could mean the dawn of a new era.”

Still, a difference of opinion emerged between those pacifists who, like Muste, believed that the usual political methods were helpless in the face of the atomic crisis and those who favored lobbying and education in an effort to achieve piecemeal changes. The former were less concerned about immediate political success than they were with dedicating their lives to what was right, with the hope that their example would convert others to the imperative of radically transforming their values and institutions. As Milton Mayer, a self-described Jewish-Christian and editor of the *Progressive*, put it, pacifists had to develop a level of “fanaticism” and dramatically demonstrate in their own lives the values they felt other Americans should espouse. Similarly, Marion Coddington asserted that “ordinary politics were not adequate to meet the present situation” and that “men were looking for a spiritual direction and meaning to life which has been lacking almost since the beginning of the scientific method and the industrial revolution.”

By the end of the conference, it had become clear to the conference participants that they were fundamentally divided on the question of tactics; radical pacifists advocated resistance, while liberal pacifists remained committed to working within the system and making alliances with nonpacifists. Recognizing that they would have to start a separate movement and perhaps even a separate organization, the former drafted a manifesto that specified how they believed pacifists should respond to the nuclear arms race and emerging Cold War. Since all Americans were “personally involved in the war system and the other evils of our day which stand in the way of One World,” pacifists had to assume “personal responsibility” for these evils through draft resistance, refusal to pay taxes “‘for the purpose of maintaining a garrison state,’” refusal to attend segregated institutions, and reducing their standard of living. Such action, the manifesto declared, was “revolutionary” in the context of an “absolutist state” that relied on conformity and fear for its existence. Theirs was
not, they insisted, an assertion of an anarchistic philosophy but rather a protest against “the war-making, absolutist state which is the mightiest force of our day for the break-down of government and orderly society.” In addition to challenging the state directly, pacifists would belong to cells, which would cultivate “spiritual power” and fellowship as well as demonstrate the practicality of pacifist principles to others. Most important, cells would become bases for evangelical activity in the larger society. By sharing economic resources, various members would be able to “go out from their cells” and draw others into the fold.  

In the winter of 1948, the continuation committee of the Pendle Hill conference called another conference, this one on “more disciplined and revolutionary activity” to be held in Chicago that April. The conference would help solidify an emerging union between older, more militant pacifists and young radicals. Former COs such as Dellinger, Rustin, Houser, Lara Gara, Francis Hall, and Catholic Worker Robert Ludlow affixed their signatures to the call and encouraged their comrades to attend. Dwight MacDonald’s signature also raised the prestige of the conference,  

In many ways, pacifist youth had anticipated their elders; as Marion Coddington noted, “young people [have already started] on this program.” As we have seen, about fifty of them had attended the two conferences on “revolutionary pacifism” called by Muste and the FOR in late 1944 and early 1945, respectively. Moreover, in February 1946, some ninety-five younger pacifists, including Dellinger and Houser, had met for a “Conference on Non-Violent Revolutionary Socialism” at Chicago’s Labor Center where they founded the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution (CNVR). Its founding statement of principles asserted that nonviolence was “the instrument of mass revolution” and called for the creation of a decentralized, socialist-pacifist society. Members of CNVR responded enthusiastically to the call, and about half of them attended the conference.  

The Chicago conference gave birth to the Peacemakers, a group committed to the program of action outlined in the Pendle Hill manifesto; Muste served as executive secretary. Peacemakers restricted membership to those who were willing to take “personal responsibility” for the contemporary crisis by cutting themselves off as much as possible from the “war-making state.” Citing Tillich, one founding member asserted that only when individuals took direct
action against the old order would there be a real possibility for “rev-
olution, of breaking down the old” so that a “new world” would
come into being. Peacemakers also restricted membership to cells as
opposed to individuals, though this structure became more flexible
over time. Cells could only become affiliated with the group if they
attempted to realize a measure of “economic sharing” and accepted a
“common discipline” compatible with the Peacemaker discipline.
That discipline required that members, at a minimum, accept nonvi-
olence “as a way of life and as the means for resisting totalitarianism
and achieving basic social change,” recognize the importance of inner
transformation “as a means to effectiveness in revolutionizing the
social order,” refuse to serve in the armed forces, and live simply.

Against “Realism”: The Politics of the Peacemakers

The Peacemakers, thus, explicitly shunned political “realism”
and immediate political effectiveness in favor of a long-term cam-
paign designed to appeal to the moral conscience of their fellow
Americans. In this way, the group differentiated itself from other paci-
fist organizations, which often had large “paper” memberships and
which favored lobbying, education, and other conventional methods
of political action. Indeed, although Peacemakers attempted to
retain a cordial relationship with the FOR (and Peacemaker activists
like Muste, Rustin, and Houser remained on the FOR’s staff), there
was tension between the two groups due mainly to the fact that
Peacemakers emerged largely out of the failure of the FOR to adopt a
more radical program. Relations between the Peacemakers and the
other leading pacifist organization, the War Resisters League (WRL),
were less strained, since radicals like Dwight MacDonald, Muste,
Dellinger, Houser, and Rustin now sat on the latter organization’s
executive committee. But even as the WRL became rhetorically com-
mitted to “political, economic, and social revolution by non-violent
means,” its old guard continued to view it as an enrollment and edu-
cational organization for COs.

The passage of a new Selective Service Act in 1948 requiring
compulsory military service bolstered the Peacemakers’ commitment
to direct war resistance. Arguing that the act represented “the same
turning-point in American development as was the advent of Hitler
to power in Germany,” they called for “total rejection and all-out
resistance. All who would truly serve their country and mankind now
must withdraw all possible voluntary support from the war effort of
this government.” By October, some 1,500 men had gone on record
indicating their refusal to register for the draft.
Significantly, in refusing to register for the draft or pay taxes, Peacemakers placed themselves in a long tradition of American and religious nonconformity. No one did this more dramatically than Amnon Hennacy, whose “one-man revolution” was a source of inspiration—and, at times, irritation—for many Peacemakers and Catholic Workers. His statement to the tax collector, which was reprinted in the Peacemaker and the Catholic Worker, asserted that, in his opposition to the state, he was “acting in the tradition which Jefferson, Paine and Emerson gave to this country. I am acting in the tradition of the early Quakers who refused to pay taxes for war and openly broke the law by hiding escaped slaves. I am practicing the same ideas as Thoreau who refused to pay taxes for the Mexican War and slavery.” While he recognized that the refusal of a few individuals to pay taxes would not prevent another world war, he believed that, in an age where politics had been reduced to “pressure groups,” it was essential to keep the idealism of prophets like Eugene V. Debs and William Lloyd Garrison alive. Those who truly believed in a Christian “Way of Life” had to “change themselves: to refuse to be a part of the dominant lie; to live the truth no matter what the consequences.” Every year, on the anniversary of Hiroshima, Hennacy fasted and picketed local branches of the Atomic Energy Commission as “penance for our sin of exploitation and atomic war.”

Peacemaker protest was not only individual in character, though that was its prevailing tendency. One collective action jointly sponsored by the Peacemakers, the Catholic Worker, and the New York branch of FOR was a “fast for peace” held the week before Easter Sunday in 1950 in Washington, D.C. The idea of a fast grew out of a sense of urgency that beset the pacifist community when President Truman announced plans to develop a hydrogen bomb. A letter from Bayard Rustin to Muste captures their alarm. Pacifists had to be “prepared to make terrible sacrifices now, to look mad now, to give up all now if necessary,” he wrote. “We must find some way to let people know that now we are prepared to go to jail or even to give up all—to get shot down if necessary—but to cry out. . . . In this way we say to the American public and to the world: When do you begin to draw the line?” Thus, when he and Muste, together with Wally Nelson, Francis Hall, and Dellinger, organized the fast, their goal was to communicate “their willingness to give life itself if necessary in the cause of peace.” In addition to having a “prophetic impact,” they viewed the fast as an opportunity to express their “penitence” for the atomic bombing of Japan as well as achieve “self-purification” to fortify them in their struggle for peace.

Fifty-four pacifists ultimately gathered at the nation’s capital for the fast, with similar actions taking place in fifty-one other cities.
in the United States and in England, Japan, Canada, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii, where they distributed leaflets calling on men and women everywhere to “draw your own personal line against war now.” A spiritual atmosphere permeated the event. The group rented a house, where they kept a candle burning day and night for the duration of the fast and set aside a room for meditation and prayer. On Good Friday, twenty-six members of the group went to the Pentagon, where they held a silent vigil during the three hours when Christ was reputed to have hung on the cross. Rustin commented, “Through the ages it’s the very small thing which turns the course of history. Jesus and his disciples fasted when they sought power. Now [we] seek power for peace.”

The Peacemakers also had a “constructive” program in which they attempted to build the new society “in the shell of the old.” Reflecting the fact that most of them had backgrounds in evangelical Protestantism, which stressed the need for each person to move from sin to holiness, the most basic component of their constructive program was the achievement of an “inner revolution,” which they defined as “a change in orientation from a self-centered to a ‘God-centered’ . . . life.” This emphasis on “inner revolution” also reflected a conscious attempt to follow Gandhi’s example. As they put it at one early meeting, their goal was to “effect a creative integration of [construction and resistance] as the Gandhian movement did.”

Peacemakers pursued the inner revolution in cells, which were seen as the link between the individual and society. The “common discipline” of the Mt. Morris House cell in New York City, for example, stated that members had a duty to strive to achieve the Kingdom of God, which had both “an inward and outward reality” and was “both present and to come.” They vowed “to be aware of God’s presence in every person, in every event and in everything that I contact,” and they dedicated themselves to “personal devotions” such as prayer and meditation.

Building communities that would prefigure the cooperative and decentralized future was another important element in the Peacemakers’ “constructive” program. Ralph and Lila Templin were especially involved in efforts to promote shared community life. Drawing on their experiences as missionaries in India, where they had come under Gandhi’s influence, they conducted seminars for fellow pacifists that emphasized the importance of the “simple healthy life” and activities like homesteading, gardening, canning, composting, and weaving. The Kingwood Community in Frenchtown, New Jersey, was one community that attempted to put such ideals into practice. Founded by some of the members of the Mt. Morris House
cell, the community instituted daily meditation and group worship, contributed all earnings to a common purse, and attempted to achieve self-sufficiency through activities such as writing, making homemade bread, gardening, and developing a mail-order business in books. Glen Gardner, New Jersey, was another such community. Founded in 1947 by four families (including the Dellingers), the seventeen-acre “homestead” had a laboratory for chemical research, a printing press, and a workshop for children’s toys.

In their emphasis on simple living, manual labor, decentralized economy, and creative work as the basis of nonviolence, the Peacemakers drew closer to Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement, which, as scholars have shown, stressed these same values from a viewpoint rooted in European Catholic thought. Reflecting this ideological concurrence, the Catholic Worker movement responded to the development of nuclear weapons and the Cold War in virtually the same terms as other radical pacifists. They called for unilateral disarmament, refused to support either the United States or the Soviet Union, opposed conscription, and called for draft resistance as a means of protesting nuclear war and the growing power of the nation-state.

The ideological compatibility of the Catholic Workers and the Peacemakers was partly due to the fact that the former had become more self-consciously Gandhian. As Mel Piehl has demonstrated, a new generation of Catholic Worker activists began exploring satyagraha after World War II. The Catholic Workers’ commitment to Gandhian nonviolence came together in their annual civil disobedience campaigns against compulsory civil defense drills that took place every year in New York City from 1955 to 1960. These demonstrations, which included acceptance of fines and jail terms, show that Catholic Workers had applied principles derived from satyagraha to the problem of nuclear war.

Crucially, however, as Piehl has pointed out, the main reason why Catholic Workers participated in these civil disobedience campaigns was not so much their opposition to civil defense or even nuclear war in general, “but to conduct an ‘act of repentance’ for the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.” While other historians have overlooked the religious conviction at the heart of the civil defense demonstrations, Piehl insists that “it is in fact central to understanding the particular character of the Catholic Workers’ actions.” Indeed, Day frequently asserted that they were demonstrating “not only to voice our opposition to war . . . but also as an act of penance for having been the first people in the world to drop the atom bomb, to make the hydrogen bomb.” By assuming partial
responsibility for nuclear war, Catholic Workers offered a means for ending the nuclear arms race and the Cold War. If the nation repented of the crime inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and took personal responsibility for the current crisis by unilaterally disarming, regardless of the risks such an action might entail, then genuine peace was possible.89

Drawing on the example of the civil defense protests, Piehl suggests that the Catholic Workers “grasped more readily than many American pacifists the essentially spiritual underpinnings of Gandhi’s principles.” He continues, “Dorothy Day and her followers, along with A. J. Muste and Martin Luther King, Jr., deserve credit for making Gandhism in America not only a morally high-minded politics, but an essentially religious approach to the major social problem of war.” In making this argument, Piehl differentiates them from non-Catholic pacifists whose individualism expressed “self-contained libertarianism” rather than submission to higher ideals of truth and justice.90

While there were libertarian tendencies within the radical pacifist movement, as the preceding analysis of the Peacemakers demonstrates, non-Catholic pacifists also had an essentially religious understanding of nonviolence, viewing their protest activities in terms of a conversion narrative in which repentance would lead to personal and national restoration. Their interest in group discipline through cell organization and community life suggests, moreover, that they were not all rugged individualists without higher loyalties than themselves. After all, the Catholic Worker was not alone in its protests against civil defense; the Peacemakers, New York FOR, and the WRL all came together to suggest that taking personal responsibility through self-suffering was the first step in making peace.

The personalist concerns and existential framework of radical pacifist activism persisted through the 1950s and 1960s even as the consensus that brought the Peacemakers together frayed. In the mid-1950s, some Peacemakers, like Muste and Rustin, began to argue that the group should focus its energies on more collective and public acts of civil disobedience in an effort to mobilize growing concern over nuclear fallout into support for disarmament and opposition to U.S. foreign policy more broadly. Others, Wally Nelson among them, preferred more individual forms of witness, such as tax resistance and building alternative communities. Unable to reconcile their differences, the former founded the Committee for Nonviolent Action against Nuclear Testing (CNVA) in 1957 to pursue their more explicitly political agenda. Still, the ideas and tactics that inspired the Peacemakers continued to shape radical pacifist activism in the
CNVA—and a similar analysis could be made of other left-pacifist formations in the postwar era, such as Liberation magazine, Quaker radicalism associated with the publication Speak Truth to Power, the World Peace Brigade, and the Catholic antiwar movement led by Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Like the Peacemakers, CNVA activists believed that nonviolent direct action was imperative in the context of the heavy bureaucratic and ideological control exercised by the military-industrial complex. It was, as the CNVA executive committee put it, 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 other Americans a sense of their responsibility for the arms race. 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 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.”

Conclusion

As the history of the Peacemakers illustrates, radical pacifists viewed modern, secular culture as excessively materialistic and ultimately undemocratic, an analysis that drew upon the ideas of an emerging anti-Stalinist left and theological currents such as personalism and existentialism. The explosion of two atomic bombs over Japan provided an apocalyptic urgency to their critique of modernity. As Muste put it in a 1947 speech, the atomic bomb was a sign that “the day of the Lord is here and it is a day of judgment—a great and very terrible day, and who shall abide it?” Insisting that fatalism was “blasphemy, a denial of God,” he called on Americans to accept their responsibility for the possible apocalypse and undergo a radical conversion in values. As this quote suggests, Christianity profoundly shaped the political culture of radical pacifism; Muste had recently returned to his Christian faith, and the vast majority of Peacemakers had been politicized through their involvement in the SCM of the interwar years. Indeed, one might argue that Gandhian nonviolence appealed to pacifists because of its emphasis on the redemptive power of self-suffering, a notion that would have deeply resonated with Protestants eager to translate their Christian ideals into reality.

And yet, despite the widespread religiosity that swept the United States after World War II, most Americans remained unresponsive
to the Peacemakers’ prophetic witness—that is, until the late 1950s, when fears of nuclear fallout became widespread. Perhaps the triumph of a “consumer ethos” in American religion accounts for this indifference. As historians have shown, while traditional piety emphasized “conversion and a stark choice between heaven and hell,” modern piety stressed personal growth and self-improvement.94 Notions of God’s wrathful judgment on the nation no longer resonated with most Americans, not least because it implied that there were limits to American power.

One might have expected otherwise. After all, Niebuhrian realists spoke of human sinfulness and arrogance of power. But they also believed that 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.” As a result, as Campbell Craig has recently noted, it became difficult for them to “plausibly oppose anything the United States might do to prevail over the Soviet Union.”95 The utopian Peacemakers and not the realists, it would seem, were the real modern-day prophets, preaching God’s judgment in the hope of creating a reservoir of spiritual power that would usher in a new era in human history. Still, it was not until the late 1950s, when fears of contaminated food and water supplies from nuclear fallout provided Americans with personal reasons for questioning the arms race, that pacifists gained a more respectful hearing.

The influence of radical pacifists on American culture and the left grew in the 1960s. As founders of CORE and as trusted advisors to Martin Luther King, Jr., they helped to make nonviolence and interracialism central elements in the early Civil Rights movement. They also served a vanguard role in the antinuclear movement, as illustrated by the protest at Mead missile base that opened this essay. When antinuclear sentiment declined in the 1960s because of the 1963 test-ban treaty, radical pacifists turned their energies on ending the war in Vietnam. Perhaps their greatest achievement was the Spring Mobilization Committee against the War in Vietnam (MOBE), chaired by Muste and later by Dellinger, which brought together anticomunist liberals, New Leftists, traditional peace organizations, and the few remaining Marxist-Leninist groups—more to the point, radical pacifists deeply connected with the spirit of the 1960s. New Leftists echoed the Peacemakers in criticizing the powerlessness and alienation generated by a bureaucratic society, in adopting an existential protest style, and in their concerns about spiritual health and well being. Radical pacifists, thus, serve as a critical link between the religious left of an earlier era and postwar radicalism.
Notes

I would like to thank Eric Meeks and Susan Danielson for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.


8. For the pivotal role played by radical pacifists in the peace and antinuclear movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, see Bennett, *Radical Pacifism*; Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties*; Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*; Wittner, *Rebels against War*; and McNeal, *Harder than War*.


10. An exception to this is Leilah Danielson, “‘In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi’: American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915–1941,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72, no. 2 (June 2003): 361–88.


16. Ibid., 208. One of Muste’s greatest fears was that New Deal reforms, while necessary, would lead to a rapport between labor and the state that would compromise labor’s independence, diffuse its radical spirit, and make it an adjunct of American militarism and imperialism. See, for example, A. J. Muste, draft of article or speech entitled “Foundations of Democracy: The Role of Economic Groups,” circa 1945, copy in A. J. Muste Papers, microfilm reel 4, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter Muste Papers, SCPC). Muste was not alone in rejecting the working class as the agent of social change. For the “demise of the union idea” among radical intellectuals, see Nelson Lichtenstein, “Pluralism, Postwar Intellectuals, and the Demise of the Union Idea,” in *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism*, ed. Sidney Milkis and Jerome Mileur (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).


19. A. J. Muste, untitled speech, 1941, reel 3, Muste Papers, SCPC.

20. A. J. Muste, address for Church of the Air, Columbia Broadcasting System, September 3, 1939, reel 3, Muste Papers, SCPC.


“It Is a Day of Judgment”


31. Dave Dellinger, interview by author, February 8, 2001, Austin, Texas; Bill Sutherland, interview by author, April 1, 2000, Austin, Texas; George Houser, interview by author, May 7, 2000, Nyack, New York; and Marjorie Swann, interview by author, November 25, 2000, Berkeley, California.

32. Swann, interview by author.

33. Dorothy Hassler, interview by author, July 4, 2000, via telephone.

35. Part of their eagerness to prove that pacifism was politically relevant had to do with Niebuhr’s attack on pacifism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. See Leilah Danielson, “‘In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi.’”

36. See, for example, D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*; Branch, *Parting the Waters*; and Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*.


38. See, for example, “A Call to Pacifist Youth,” *Fellowship* 3, No. 10 (December 1937), for an account of a meeting of “All Youth against War,” a conference that helped lead to the formation of the Youth Mobilization Committee against War of which Dellinger, Houser, Farmer, Sutherland, Swann, and other young pacifists were members. For some thoughtful recent discussions of American anti-interventionism, see Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), and Justus Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939–1941* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

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


41. Caleb Foote, “Prison Is Revenge,” *Fellowship* 12, no. 5 (May 1946). For similar arguments by imprisoned COs, see Walter G. Taylor, “Can We Outgrow the Prison System?” *Fellowship* 11, no. 10 (October 1945); Herbert Wehrly, “Conscription Slows Down,” *Fellowship* 12, no. 6 (June 1946); and “Statement of Aims ofAssignees Striking at Civilian Public Service Camp #76,” April 30, 1946, series A-3, box 7, folder 5, FOR Records, SCPC. See also reminiscences by COs in Gara and Gara, *A Few Small Candles*.

42. For a useful discussion of intra-pacifist debates regarding administration of CPS camps, see Bennett, *Radical Pacifism*, 69–134. For an account of the experience of Catholic COs during the war, see Gordon C.


46. Ibid.

47. Kierkegaard’s writings became more widely available to Americans through Walter Lowrie’s English translations, which began with the publication of Kierkegaard (London: Oxford University Press) in 1938.

48. More evidence for the influence of Kierkegaard on pacifists can be found in James Farmer’s autobiography, in which he recalled that Muste opened a 1944 FOR meeting with quotes from Kierkegaard. See Farmer, Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 75, 102. In 1950, Muste circulated excerpts from Kierkegaard’s Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing among his fellow Peacemakers. See Ernest and Marion (Coddington) Bromley papers, private collection, Voluntown, Connecticut (hereafter Bromley Papers).


52. Muste, Not by Might, 56; Muste, “Conscience against the Atomic Bomb.”

54. A. J. Muste, “The Role of the Pacifist in the Atomic Age,” Fellowship 12, no. 8 (September 1946).


57. A. J. Muste, “The Atomic Bomb and the American Dream,” Fellowship 11, no. 10 (October 1945). As the above discussion suggests, Muste’s sense of the prophetic tradition differed sharply from Niebuhrian realists. Niebuhr saw himself as a Hebrew prophet when he inveighed against American temptations to power and illusions of omnipotence. Still, he justified the use of atomic weapons as having shortened the war and viewed the Cold War as an inescapable reality that could only be managed and controlled through realpolitik. Such arguments flew in the face of Muste’s belief that peace was dependent on repentance. The role of a prophet, he wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr, was not only to warn people of the threat of divine judgment but also to call upon “your hearers to repent, act and so flee from that judgment.” But by preaching doom and gloom and then suggesting that there was no way for people to escape their sinful natures, Niebuhr and other Christian realists fostered not tension but “anxiety or a pervading sense of futility, for tension in the biblical sense is surely characteristic of a situation where man stands before his God and makes a decision.” The role of the prophet, moreover, was to bring God’s judgment to bear on the nation as well as the individual; the “prophets address the nation or the community quite as much as the individual.” Niebuhr, however, believed that there was one law for society and another for the individual. In so doing, he accepted violence and the struggle for power as “normative” rather than the “very taproot of evil.” His theology, thus, expressed “despair,” not hope and vision. See A. J. Muste, “Theology of Despair: An Open Letter to Reinhold Niebuhr” (1948), reprinted in The Essays of A.J. Muste, ed. Hentoff, 302–7. See also Muste, Not by Might, 91, 106–9.
“It Is a Day of Judgment”


60. See Record of Proceedings. See also Cecil Hinshaw, “Discipline and Group Life,” paper circulated for the November conference, series A-1, box 5, folder 13, FOR Records, SCPC.


64. “Crusade for a Changed, Warless World,” circa November 1947 (emphasis in original). See also “One World Groups: Draft of Manifesto,” circa December 1947, which was “another step in the effort to carry out one of the suggestions emphasized at Pendle Hill Conferences of the Consultative Peace Council in May and November.” Both documents in series A-1, box 5, folder 13, FOR Records, SCPC.


66. While MacDonald would eventually withdraw from politics in the face of the deepening international crisis, the same was not true of the radical pacifists who were his magazine’s greatest fans. For MacDonald’s thought and politics, see Michael Wreszin, A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight MacDonald (New York: Basic Books, 1994).


68. Wittner, Rebels against War, 154–56. See also Bennett, Radical Pacifism, 145–48.

70. Peacemakers discovered that those living in rural areas had a difficult time finding fellow radical pacifists with whom to form a cell.

71. Peacemakers pamphlet, dated 1949, Bromley Papers.

72. For Peacemakers disinterest in conventional political activity, see, for example, minutes of the “Continuation Committee of Chicago Conference,” Yellow Springs, Ohio, April 20–22, 1948, Peacemakers Papers, SCPC.

73. As George Houser put it, “The WRL wasn’t as free as a Peacemakers group could be [since it] had been put together for the purpose of taking direct action and—in a rather uncompromising way. [Peacemakers] was established for that purpose.” Houser, interview by author. See also Bennett, Radical Pacifism, 145–60, and Wittner, Rebels against War, 153.

74. “Call for a Conference on Civil Disobedience to the Draft,” circa July 1948, Peacemakers Papers, SCPC.

75. See Dave Dellinger and Julius Eichel to the Attorney General, October 27, 1948, Peacemakers Papers, SCPC. Apparently, the government’s policy was to single out some nonregistrants while leaving the larger group unmolested since only about forty of them had been arrested and sentenced to prison terms by July 1, 1949. Note that, in February 1947, radical pacifists—including Dellinger, MacDonald, Mayer, Houser, Rustin, Muste, Scott Nearing, Frank Olmstead, Larry Gara, Richard Gregg, Roy Finch, Robert Ludlow, James Peck, Theodore Walser, and George Yamada—either burned their draft cards or mailed them to President Truman as a way of protesting the likelihood of peacetime conscription. Of course, the burning of draft cards would become a popular way to express one’s opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1960s. See George Houser memo, March 5, 1947, Bromley Papers.

76. There are numerous examples of pacifists citing Thoreau, the gospels, etc. as justifications for their civil disobedience. See, for example, Ernest Bromley, “The Case for Tax Refusal,” Fellowship 13, no. 10 (November 1947); News of Tax Refusal, January 28, 1950, Bromley Papers; Muste’s statement to the Internal Revenue Service, Peacemaker 2, no. 9 (April 21, 1951): 3.

77. Ralph Templin made a bust of Hennacy, revealing the high regard with which the Christian anarchist was held by Peacemakers.
78. Amnon Hennacy’s statement to the Internal Revenue Service was reprinted in the Peacemaker 1, no. 10 (January 30, 1950): 4.


80. The Peacemaker 1, no. 12 (April 25, 1950): 1–2; Muste to members of FOR executive committee, February 27, 1950, series A-2, box 4, folder 11, FOR Records, SCPC; Call for Holy Week Fast issued by Peacemakers fast committee, box 1, series W-1, folder 5, Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker Collection, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.


83. Mt. Morris House cell discipline, Peacemakers Papers, SCPC.

84. The Peacemaker 1, no. 2 (June 28, 1949): 3.

85. The Peacemaker 3, no. 1 (June 8, 1951): 2.

86. The Peacemaker 2, no. 3 (July 26, 1950): 1. For more on Glen Gardner, see Dellinger, From Yale to Jail. The Templins, along with Ernest Bromley, Marion (Coddington) Bromley, Wally Nelson, and Juanita Nelson, set up a “mutual security plan” in their Yellow Springs, Ohio, cell to provide for the dependents of cell members should they end up in jail. See the Peacemaker 1, no. 3 (July 18, 1949): 2.


89. Ibid., 85.

90. Ibid., 82.


92. CNVA leaflet, circa 1961, box 1, folder 2, Deming Collection.
93. Muste speech, untitled, 1947, series A-1, box 5, folder 3, FOR Records, SCPC.

94. Moorhead, “Apocalypticism in Mainstream Protestantism,” 482. See also Hudnut-Beumler, Looking for God in the Suburbs.

95. Craig, Glimmer of a New Leviathan, 79.

**abstract** This article argues that Christian beliefs and concerns shaped the political culture of anti-nuclear activism in the early years of the Cold War. It focuses in particular on the origins of the Peacemakers, a group founded in 1948 by a mostly Protestant group of radical pacifists to oppose conscription and nuclear proliferation. Like others who came of age in the interwar years, the Peacemakers questioned the Enlightenment tradition, with its emphasis on reason and optimism about human progress, and believed that liberal Protestantism had accommodated itself too easily to the values of modern, secular society. But rather than adopt the “realist” framework of their contemporaries, who gave the United States critical support in its Cold War with the Soviet Union, radicals developed a politics of resistance rooted in a Christian framework in which repentance for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the first step toward personal and national redemption. Although they had scant influence on American policymakers or the public in the early years of the Cold War, widespread opposition to nuclear testing and U.S. foreign policy in the late 1950s and 1960s launched them into leadership roles in campaigns for nuclear disarmament and peace.