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Review of Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World

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Rose Marie Berger, Ken Butigan, Judy Coode, and Marie Dennis, eds. *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World: Biblical, Theological, Ethical, Pastoral and Strategic Dimensions of Nonviolence*. Brussels: Pax Christi International, 2020. ISBN 978-178456-716-3. Pp. 322. Paperback. \$29.45 US.

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Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World is a product of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a project of Pax Christi International. The goal of the initiative is “that the Catholic Church ... will lead the world away from perpetual violence and war by ... developing and promoting nonviolent practices and strategies” (www.nonviolencejustpeace.org). The Initiative grows out of a conference in Rome in April 2016, “Nonviolence and Just Peace,” co-sponsored by Pax Christi and what was then the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. That conference issued a statement, “An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence,” which, among other things, called on the Church to abandon the just-war theory. *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace* can be read as an expansion of the 2016 appeal, fleshing out its theological and pragmatic frameworks, and a manual for its implementation. It argues on theological grounds that the Church must be nonviolent and on practical grounds that nonviolent approaches are much more effective in leading to peaceful and just results than are violent approaches.

Besides front and end matter, the book consists of four parts. Part I sounds the initial call for a “return to Gospel nonviolence” and briefly describes the work of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative. The largest section of Part I narrates seven examples from around the world of Catholics engaging in active nonviolence in situations of violent or potentially violent conflict (one of the seven, the Michoacan Community Self-Defense forces in Mexico, eventually arms itself). The authors distinguish nonviolence from pacifism, if the latter is understood to be a refusal to actively engage conflict or resist violence (60).

Part II, which occupies almost half the volume, explores the biblical and theological foundations of nonviolence. It first traces the increasing emphasis on nonviolence in Catholic Church teaching from Vatican II, which, in *Gaudium et Spes*, encouraged peacemaking, praised nonviolence, and condemned the arms race and counter-population warfare, but seemed to treat military defense as a duty of nations (#78–80), to Pope Francis’s 2017 World Day of Peace Message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.” A section on the Hebrew Scriptures concludes, “We can say categorically that the God of the Bible does not use violence” (111). The many texts in which God does use or command violence are interpreted as the result of the people’s understanding God through the lens of their own experience as they are “gradually realising that their God is the God of life” (111).

The heart of Part II—really of the entire book—is a treatment of the Gospel narratives of Jesus (114–47). Jesus teaches nonviolence and lives nonviolently; there are no exceptions to this. He teaches and lives that way because that is the way God is. “Jesus teaches and practises nonviolence because he has come to know that God, his Everlasting Parent, Abba and Amma, is nonviolent” (117). In particular, this is true of his call to love our enemies, which rests on “bedrock”—“we are on solid ground if we act as God acts” (117). The authors follow Glen Stassen in interpreting the

Sermon on the Mount as counseling not passive nonresistance but “creative, nonviolent direct action” (123). Even Jesus’s overturning of the money-changers’ tables does no violence to persons; it shows “that a peacemaker sometimes has to be first a peace disturber” (132). As a later section on Christology states, “The culmination of the revelation of the way things are, and the way God is, occurs in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is not just one more witness to the power of nonviolence” (153).

Christology is treated in “Towards a Theology of Nonviolence” (148–225), the longest section of the book, which reviews, besides Christology, the theological topics of creation and anthropology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology, with nonviolence as the interpretive key. Creation in Genesis, unlike in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, is nonviolent; violence enters the world through sin. “The thread running throughout scripture from Genesis forward is the building up,” empowered by the Holy Spirit, “of God’s creation in love, which bears fruit in peace” (172). The Church is the community that “makes salvation visible” (184) and “undoes the logic of violence” by martyrdom if necessary (185). In history, however, the Church has often been “a countersign to the nonviolence of God” (189), as it justifies war by the just-war theory, advocates it in the Crusades, practices violence in the Inquisition, provides theological rationales for slavery, colonialism, and Apartheid, and contributes to “a culture of violence against women” (191–98). After reviewing this violent history, the text turns to “the Church’s history of nonviolence,” from the second-century Acts of [Paul and] Thekla to the Philippines of the twentieth century (203–15). Part II concludes with treatments of formation in nonviolence and of the spirituality of nonviolence.

The relatively brief Part III, “The Practice and Power of Nonviolence,” develops numerous examples of successful nonviolent movements, mostly faith-based and mostly twentieth-century. It draws on the work of Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (both of whom are contributors to the volume) to argue that nonviolent resistance is more successful than violent resistance. “Armed rebel victories almost never produce democratic societies” and are “often followed by relapses into civil war” (239). Nonviolent civil resistance engages more of the citizenry and, when faith-based, has greater strength for enduring the adversities that tend to turn people toward violence (241).

Part IV, “Embracing Nonviolence,” draws theoretical and practical conclusions. It begins with a critique of the just-war theory. Among the deficiencies of just-war theory are that it too often serves to license rather than prevent violence; it diverts attention to violence, away from the transformation of conflict into sustainable peace; it fails to contribute to the formation of peacemakers; and, most important, it is contrary “to Jesus’s call to love the way he loved us” (256–57). The authors propose, in its place, “a moral framework for nonviolence and just peace” (263–72) as more in keeping with the teaching and action of Jesus and better respecting “the sacred dignity of all people and creation” (257). The components of this framework are principles and practices for (1) *jus in conflictione*, dealing nonviolently with the conflicts that inevitably break out in human society; (2) *jus ex bello*, escaping violence once it breaks out; and (3) *jus ad pacem*, building sustainable peace. The authors illustrate the application of these principles with examples from Eli McCarthy’s *A Just Peace Ethic Primer* (see Collinge 2020). Part IV concludes with numerous recommendations for all levels of the Church (289–302), ranging from rewriting the section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that includes the just-war criteria¹ to supporting “training in parenting skills dealing with social media and discipline in the home” (293).

Appendices contain the 2016 statement mentioned above; a statement, titled “Nonviolence nurtures hope, can renew the Church,” arising from a 2019 conference sponsored by Pax Christi International at the Vatican; and a text of unstated provenance, “Ten elements of nonviolence.”

Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace is a treasury of theological argument, biblical commentary, historical examples, and practical suggestions. If implemented, it would do much to produce a less violent and more just Church and world. But I wish to express a few critical comments about its substance and format.

The text is not sufficiently clear as to what constitutes violence, and hence what nonviolence must forgo. A section defining violence begins, as it should, with “the intentional use of physical force” against oneself or other people (62) but quickly proceeds through many other deplorable practices to “financial abuse” (63). Has embezzlement become a violent crime? Soon we read, “The denial of human-induced climate change is a form of violence” (69). “Violence” loses its meaning if it becomes a label for everything bad. It would be better to focus on physical force against persons and to treat other cases as analogous in some respects.

But even physical force directed intentionally toward persons is not necessarily a bad thing. Recently in Maryland a crossing guard was honored for shoving a little girl out of the path of a speeding car, which hit the guard instead. Suppose the little girl was threatened not by a car but by an assailant, and the guard shoved the assailant to the pavement. Most of us would praise the guard’s use of physical force in the imagined as well as the real case. Jesus never speaks of the use of force to protect others, either to advocate it or to condemn it (a fact that gave Augustine his opening for just-war theorizing). The only instance in the Gospels in which he intervenes to defend another person is the case of the woman taken in adultery in John 8.1–11. *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace* treats Jesus’s response as a creative example of unarmed civilian protection (137–38). This is true, but it takes place in a ritualized setting in which there is time for cleverness. The imagined crossing guard does not have that luxury.

Suppose it was not a civilian crossing guard but a police officer who stopped the assailant. The book’s section on “the issue of policing” (278–81) recognizes that current methods of policing are far too violent and rightly praises efforts at unarmed community policing. But even the authors cannot quite say that policing must never be violent; rather, if the steps they commend are taken, “It ought to be far less likely, if at all, that police operations would resort to armed and potentially lethal use of force” (281).

A similar hesitancy governs the book’s approach to “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), the principle that nations have a duty to intervene, militarily if necessary, when a population is facing genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the like. R2P was first put forward in the 1990s in response to the Rwandan genocide (1994) and the Srebrenica massacre (1995) and was ratified by the full United Nations in 2005. It received the support of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The authors of the present volume endorse nonviolent intervention but are suspicious of military intervention as vulnerable to abuse, as arguably happened in Libya in 2011. They label it as “controversial” and “contested” but go no further.

It is cases like those of policing and R2P that have led me to continue to teach the just-war theory. Physical force, even with its enhancement by technology, is, like creativity, a human power created

by God, not to be rejected but to be used prudently. It must not be used to do what is immoral in itself, such as intentionally killing the innocent, and when used against other human beings, it must be used to resist harm without causing greater harm. Modern weaponry does so much harm that the Church is right increasingly to circumscribe the use of it. Thus, the traditional just-war principles of last resort, proportionality, and discrimination (noncombatant immunity) bear more weight than they did in the past. I accept the authors' overall framework of just peacebuilding, and I agree that action should be nonviolent whenever possible. But I retain the just-war principles, amplified by recent developments in *jus ante bellum* (right action before war breaks out) and *jus post bellum* (right action in the wake of war), for guidance when there seems no way to protect others without the use or threat of force. The book does persuade me, however, to give Pope Francis's 2017 World Day of Peace Message on Nonviolence a prominent place in the treatment of war and peace in my Catholic Social Teaching course.

Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace lists 118 contributors, coming from or working in thirty-nine countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Sections are not credited to authors by name except when already-existing publications are being excerpted. The editors have stitched together their contributions into a coherent text, for the most part. Transitions, however, can be abrupt. Sections in different parts of the book, for instance those mentioned above on the Gospels and Christology, or two treatments of environmental violence (68–71 and 245–48), contain overlapping material. This is one of many reasons why the omission of an index is unfortunate. Contributors' styles vary; most sections could easily be read by students, but some are technical, especially several that draw on the theories of René Girard. Occasionally there is an arresting turn of phrase: "As Christians, we also recognize the eternal aspect of time" (261). The typography of the main text is clear and readable, but I wish some of the ample spacing between paragraphs had been devoted instead to expanding the size of the footnotes. Some notes contain important substantive material (especially one that occupies almost all of page 114), and their present 7-point font strains the unaided eye.

Despite these reservations, I recommend *Advancing Nonviolence and Just Peace in the Church and the World* as a valuable contribution to the Church's ongoing reflection on conflict and violence and how to approach them in the spirit of Jesus.

References

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¹ Called simply "Article V" in the text but actually Article 5 of Chapter 2 of Section 2 of Part 3 (see especially #2309).