INTRODUCTION

Climate, Conflict, and the Conventional Narrative of Christian Pacifism

Christianity has a long and profound tradition of nonviolence. The tradition begins in the New Testament church (and extends even further back, in various precursor forms, to the last few centuries B.C.E.) and it continues to the present. The significance of the tradition can be measured, in part, by an influence that extends far beyond not only the peace churches that rest most deeply in the tradition but beyond Christianity itself. Whether in its early anticipation of an immediate eschaton that obviated the need for the use of force, in its growing emphasis on obedience to the nonviolent teachings of Jesus as expressed in the synoptic gospels, in the obligations of those joining religious orders to avoid violence during the Middle Ages, in the development of the "peace churches" – Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, Quakers, and others – during the Reformation, or in more recent work that has been done by important scholars and public intellectuals like Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and those whom they've influenced, this commitment to nonviolence has expressed itself in myriad ways that have, nonetheless, always been identifiably connected to the church. In an age in which the capacity to wreak violence has revealed itself on such massive scales – including, potentially, the obliteration of the human race – a set of voices arguing for alternatives to violence is especially worth hearing. Moreover, over the past 150 years, the viability of nonresistance/nonviolence/pacifism/nonviolent resistance[1] as an idea has proven to be an especially powerful force for social change,

[1] These terms do not mean the same thing; for now, though, they bear sufficient familial resemblance to each other to be treated alike for my purposes.

generally to the good and often directly connected to actions of the Christian church.[2] While there is still much to be done in a violent world, the church's commitment to and effective advocacy for nonviolence can hardly be understated.

Given its significance not only for Christian communities of faith but for the larger world, this legacy of nonviolence warrants close attention by anyone who would think about matters of war and peace from within the context of Christian theology and ethics, especially during times of rapid change. What role might this tradition of nonviolence play in the twenty-first century as we address war in a warming world?

In this volume, I raise a series of questions about the way those who have advocated nonviolence have understood time and the implications of this understanding for our entrance into the Anthropocene.[3] If the major thesis of this book – that we are entering a new social imaginary[4] shaped by environmental concerns and demanding the reconstruction of our thoughts,

[2] See John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) for an argument that the idea of pacifism has, since the U.S. Civil War, led to the end of conventional warfare in most of the world.

[3] "The Anthropocene" is a term popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen at the beginning of the twenty-first century to describe the epoch in which human beings gained the capacity to fundamentally alter the earth's geological and ecological systems. While start dates for the Anthropocene vary – from the dawn of agriculture and animal domestication to the dawn of the widespread use of fossil fuels to the first explosion of a nuclear weapon on July 16, 1945 – most people use the term to describe the time period that human beings are now entering, which will be defined by environmental concerns. Meant to convey the idea of a human-influenced time-period that can be measured on a geological scale, the term is used informally in scientific and popular culture, and neither a firm starting point nor an agreed-upon definition exists for it. When I use the term in this book, I mean it to convey the time period that we are now entering in which environmental concerns are so severe, so widespread, so dramatic, and so impactful of human existence that human beings will increasingly make sense of the world around them through environmental lenses: not only will climate change, the catastrophic loss of biodiversity, growing human populations, the proliferation of waste, and other environmental concerns become problems to which we must attend; they will shape the way we understand and address other problems. In this book, I will use the terms "Anthropocene" and "Environmental Age" as near-synonyms, recognizing that "environmental" is also a politically fraught term within the literatures of those who engage matters having to do with the interactions and interconnectedness of the natural world and human beings.

[4] The term "social imaginary" is philosopher Charles Taylor's. In his book, *A Secular Age,* Taylor writes of the social imaginary as "the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world" (146) that is "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain" (171) – "that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense that they have" (173). More on Taylor and the secular age will appear later in the book. See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).

practices, and technologies in order to meaningfully address environmentally shaped conflicts – is anywhere near correct, then questions about when we live are every bit as pressing as those about how we live. Understanding our place in time and understanding our conflicts are of a piece. And understanding our place in time theologically means accounting for both the continuities and discontinuities of the human movement through a history in which God is a primary actor, creating and transforming, judging and redeeming, and in which nonviolence has played a significant role.

Yet what is the conventional narrative of the history of Christian pacifism?

1 THE CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE OF THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN PACIFISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

The conventional narrative of Christian pacifism's movement through time goes something like this: Jesus and the New Testament writers espoused nonviolence and/or nonresistance, and pacifism would be central to the ethic of the early church until the time of Constantine (and it would be the exclusive ethic of the church from the close of the canon to around 173 C.E.). After Constantine, the church would align itself with Roman imperial power and, as a result, the pacifist ethic would be replaced by one centered around just war thinking, especially after and due to Augustine. This realignment with the state constitutes not only a change but a fall away from fidelity to a Jesus-centered ethics. As a recent and brief rehearsal of this narrative, W. Michael Slattery's text is representative: "For more than one century after the death of Jesus, until around 173 AD, the Church undisputedly, univocally, and consistently was pacifist and remained so in Church teaching of the fathers for two more centuries, but with increasing compromise of its non-ordained followers until Constantine and the later cementing of 'righteous' violence by Augustine."[5]

Within the conventional narrative, after Augustine and until the rise of the peace churches during the Protestant Reformation, occasional persons and particular groups would promote nonviolence but either in ways that allowed violence on the part of most Christians or that the larger church would view as heretical. However, the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the authority of the Bible (including New Testament commandments to practice

[5] W. Michael Slattery, *Jesus the Warrior: Historical Christian Perspectives and Problems on the Morality of War and the Waging of Peace* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2007), 84.

nonresistance) and the church's realignment with the state (or, more accurately, range of realignments with the state) create space for various communions to shape themselves around the early church's peace ethic. The peace churches (Quaker, Amish, Brethren, Mennonite, etc.), though remaining small, sometimes persecuted, and generally excluded from the Christian mainstream, would choose to reveal an alternative way of living that bore witness to the nonviolent Gospel for both the rest of the church and the larger world. In the twentieth century, as wars grew increasingly violent and unconstrained, as weapons grew increasingly lethal and indiscriminate, as the legacies of the social gospel movement and progressivism found a home within some of the church's range of communions, as nonviolent resistance revealed itself as an effective means for inducing social change, as resources from other faiths came into view, and as the age of Christendom initiated by Constantine came to a close, the wisdom of the peace churches emerged as a means for establishing a viable and faithful Christian ethic[6] across the theological spectrum.[7]

[6] Among pacifists who promote such a narrative – in part or whole, with varying levels of apologetics built into their arguments – see Guy Franklin Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969); Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for me to Fight*, trans. by Alan Kreider and Oliver Coburn (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headly Bros. Pub., 1982); Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960); G. J. Heering, *The Fall of Christianity: A Study of Christianity, the State, and War* (New York: Fellowship Publications, 1943); Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Christian Pacifism in History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958); Edgar W. Orr, *Christian Pacifism* (Ashingdon, England: C. W. Daniel Co., Ltd., 1958); Joseph T. Culliton, ed., *Non-violence – Central to Christian Spirituality: Perspectives from Scripture to the Present* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); Dale W. Brown, *Biblical Pacifism: A Peace Church Perspective* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1986); Dennis Byler, *Making War and Making Peace: Why Some Christians Fight and Some Don't* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989); Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *The Church's Peace Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Peter Brock, *A Brief History of Pacifism: From Jesus to Tolstoy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992); Peter Brock, *Varieties of Pacifism: A Survey from Antiquity to the Outset of the Twentieth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); E. Morris Sider and Luke Keefer Jr., eds., *A Peace Reader* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2002); and W. Michael Slattery, *Jesus the Warrior? Historical Christian Perspectives and Problems on the Morality of War and the Waging of Peace* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007). The first four (Cadoux, Hershberger, Hornus, and Bainton) are especially important in developing this history, as many of the later writers will rely on their research and narratives. One important exception to this narrative is that visible in Michael G. Long, ed., *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), which fills in sources and details that are generally ignored.

[7] I should note that one variation on this narrative comes from some contemporary Roman Catholic sources, who repeat the claims about the early church's commitment to

On such a telling, the discontinuous quality of the history of Christian pacifism is obvious: aside from the time of the early church, the pacifist Christian voice has always been in the minority and vulnerable. As Geoffrey Nuttall expresses it, "[T]o offer a straight narrative history of Christian Pacifism would hardly be possible. The story is too discontinuous, the existence, or at least the appearance, of pacifists and pacifist witness within the Church is too occasional and sporadic."[8] In such a narrative, only persons of heroic faith or inwardly focused and insular communities tended to espouse nonviolence – and such persons and communities come along only sporadically. Yet where such persons and communities exist, we find moral exemplars and visions of a purer Christian/Kingdom ethic than we can find within a wider church that has compromised fidelity to Jesus's commands in order to pursue justice through the use of force and has sacrificed a willingness to live vulnerably in order to protect itself and others.

This narrative is, moreover, reinforced by those who don't necessarily align themselves with the pacifist traditions. So, for example, sourcebooks on world religions, when they address Christianity and conflict, repeat the narrative.[9] Far from simply describing the tradition of nonviolence in Christianity, these sourcebooks reiterate and thereby extend the power of the conventional narrative.

More fascinatingly, many opponents of pacifism repeat a version of this narrative in their own work. While they take exception to the notion that the advent of Constantinianism constitutes a kind of "fall" (arguing, instead, that it initiates a time in which the Christian faith necessarily undergoes revisions in order to bring other important Christian values and

nonviolence and the fall of the church after Constantine but ignore the Radical Reformers entirely on their way to suggesting that twentieth-century Roman Catholics like Dorothy Day and Pope John XXIII (in *Pacem in Terris*) rediscover and/or reclaim the church's pacifist roots. See, e.g., Eileen Egan, *Peace Be With You: Justified Warfare or the Way of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) and David Carroll Cochran, *Catholic Realism and the Abolition of War* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014). Even this peculiar (if not entirely surprising) bit of pacifist silencing, though, doesn't undermine the conventional narrative so much as bring it into higher relief: the distance between the fourth and twentieth centuries is even greater than that between the fourth and the fifteenth.

[8] Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Christian Pacifism in History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 1.

[9] See, e.g., Theodore J. Koontz, "Christian Nonviolence: An Interpretation" in Terry Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 169–196; John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 99–123; Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Nicole M. Harswell, (eds.), *Religion, War, and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): Chs. 2–4.

virtues, including justice and responsibility, to the fore), non-pacifists still tend to repeat two key claims in the pacifist narrative: that the pre-Constantinian church was pacifist and that the advent of Constantinian Christianity and the project of justifying the use of violence mandated accepting levels of moral ambiguity that the earlier church didn't have to accept. So, for example, a just warrior as eminent as Paul Ramsey would open the Introduction to his classic book *War and the Christian Conscience* with the claim that, "[f]or almost two centuries of the history of the early church, Christians were universally pacifists,"[10] and a Christian realist as prominent as Reinhold Niebuhr would note that Christian pacifism "is not a heresy. It is rather a valuable asset for the Christian faith. It is a reminder to the Christian community that the relative norms of social justice, which justify both coercion and resistance to coercion, are not final norms, and that Christians are in constant peril of forgetting their relative and tentative character and of making them too completely normative."[11] While Ramey, Niebuhr, and their like make strong arguments for just war and/or Christian realism in their work, when they accede to pacifism's conventional narrative, they place themselves in the awkward positions of surrendering not only to a particular reading of New Testament texts and a distinct vision of the early church, but to a kind of idealism. They give up the figurative moral high ground and argue, instead, that trying to live on the high ground is untenable, unachievable, or quixotic. They confuse inspirational and aspirational visions, thereby not only unfairly mixing moral rigor with utopianism but undermining their own commitments to the ideals that inspire their thoughts.[12]

[10] Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), xv. The narrative is repeated by other just warriors in texts such as Arthur F. Holmes (ed.), *War and Christian Ethics: Classic and Contemporary Readings on the Morality of War* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1975); David L. Clough and Brian Stiltner, *Faith and Force: A Christian Debate about War* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2007); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994); Richard J. Regan, *Just War: Principles and Cases* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); Matthew A. Shandle, *The Origins of War: A Catholic Perspective* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011). Even James Turner Johnson repeats a version of the narrative in his book, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[11] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist" in Arthur Holmes, ed., *War and Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 303.

[12] Perhaps one bit of evidence for this is the generally unhelpful means-versus-ends disagreement within the Christian just war community between those who argue that the

The conventional narrative relies on a particular pattern in history in which post-Constantinian pacifists attempt to retrieve pre-Constantinian wisdom. The retrieval is unsurprising: if the early church exists in a morally Edenic time in which it faithfully obeys Jesus's commandments to turn the other cheek and love even enemies, then the church's choice to align itself with secular political power in order to insure its continued existence and social significance in the fourth century constitutes a kind of fall from grace. After Constantine, particular persons and communities will rediscover the messianic (nonviolent) ethic of the New Testament and enact it in their lives together. This is, in part, due to the predominance of Protestant interpretations of the history of nonviolence; Protestants, after all, have been far more likely to elevate to primacy the authority of the Bible and, particularly, a history-oriented reading of New Testament texts in making sense of the faith. Yet this pattern is about more than an emphasis on the authority of the Bible. After all, pacifists rely not only on the New Testament but on the writings of the early church fathers in defending their vision of the moral life; the fall from grace happens early in the fourth century, not late in the first. Post-Constantine, then, those who advocate nonviolence within Christian thought repeatedly loop back to the pre-Constantinian church as if the temporal distance between the two periods could – and even should – be disregarded. Treating centuries of history as of limited use for their purposes, pacifist communities skip back to a particular period in the early history of the church that they think will be more useful. That is, the conventional narrative expresses a myth of return.[13]

This myth of return, as expressed in the conventional narrative about the tradition of nonviolence in the Christian church, is undergirded by two

word "just" in that phrase comes from "justified" and those who argue it comes from "justice." The former emphasize processes for moving forward in morally ambiguous terrain; the latter in seeking after a particular goal on the far side of that terrain. Sometimes lost in the disagreement are deep convictions about fundamental Christian ideals like *agape* that both found processes and fund ends.

[13] I hasten to add that I am not suggesting that the nonviolent church necessarily participates in a "myth of eternal return" à la Mircea Eliade. Indeed, the dominant perspective of the nonviolent church isn't that it should be shaped (morally and otherwise) by its origin but by its conclusion: it attempts to live into the Kingdom of God, which has not yet fully arrived. As such, the nonviolent church expresses a vision of linear rather than cyclical time. The "return" I describe is neither to Eden nor to Golgotha; it is a return to the early church as the clearest model for how to live as a church that stood outside the patterns of behavior shaped by the use of violence and complicity in the coercive power of the state. For more on the myth of eternal return and Christian history, see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1959), particularly Ch. 4.

basic assumptions: that the pre-Constantinian church manifested an ethic closer to that promoted by Jesus in the New Testament than the Constantinian church and that, since Constantine, advocacy of nonviolence has been episodic and discrete to particular persons and minority communities within Christianity rather than continuously expressed within Christian thought and practices. The latter assumption motivates the return; the former provides a place in time to which to return.

I argue against the conventional narrative in order to undermine these two basic assumptions behind it. First, I will argue that voices for nonviolence in the early church are neither as uniform nor as dominant as the conventional narrative suggests. They are, nonetheless, consistently present. Once we better locate them in their own times and vis-à-vis other voices in the church and surrounding cultures, we can recognize how their embeddedness reveals something significant about the church's witness to nonviolence. It can also help us establish patterns of thought and behavior that continue with regularity through the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and up to the present. That is, once those voices become more varied and less dominant, the possibilities of seeing continuities in the witness of nonviolence throughout the history of the church grow. There have been significant figures and communities throughout history giving voice to a priority toward nonviolence, but their voices have been drowned out by earlier voices to whom we have given megaphones when we have overclaimed the emphasis on nonviolence in the early church.

And, second, I will argue that the various motives and visions that shape nonviolent Christian ethics in the early church are not as pure, clear, or faithful as the conventional narrative describes. Even those figures within the early church deemed most significant by the conventional narrative were driven by problematic motives and values, and these problematic motives and values find expression in the types of reasoning they used in emphasizing nonviolence. As such, we need to treat these figures with a greater degree of suspicion and ambivalence. Treating such figures with more ambivalence, however, is not the same as dismissing them. Allowing for these figures' failings – and even forgiving their failings – helps those who would follow after them recognize their own potential for morally troubling behavior (therein potentially shaping a more forgiving space within which to act), identify some of the sources and consequences of those failings (therein recognizing the necessity of shaping such a forgiving space), and either eliminate or compensate for those failings (therein making resources for justice on the far side of forgiveness more possible).

Having argued against these two basic assumptions, I will then be in a position to argue against the myth of return that animates the conventional Christian pacifist narrative and for a different, more human, narrative. That myth, I will argue, displays a reading of history that can bear the weight neither of the historical data nor of a theological vision of God's work in time that is shaped by creation, crucifixion, and resurrection: a vision that can account for both the continuous and discontinuous movements of traditions through time. Ultimately, it is the *myth* that needs to be challenged more than the narrative that it supports because as we enter into a new social imaginary, *return* is the one direction that we won't be able to go, and to attempt to do so will exacerbate many of the most pressing issues surrounding climate-shaped conflict.

To be clear: I intend to undermine these two assumptions and challenge the myth of return not with the goal of undermining the significance of the Christian witness of nonviolence but, instead, of better situating the Christian pacifist traditions in history in order to shape their usefulness as we enter into a new environmentally shaped social imaginary and face conflicts arising out of and being shaped by that new social imaginary. That is, I want to better locate Christian pacifism in the past in order to help carry its wisdom into the future. From the perspective of the conventional narrative, the options for dealing with pacifism are either to leave it and the early church in the past and, therein, risk either leaving behind the strange wisdom of the New Testament (the just warrior's temptation) or to valorize it, claiming the moral wisdom of the early church in continuity with the New Testament but disregarding much of the church's history between the fourth and sixteenth or twentieth centuries (the pacifist's temptation). Again, I wish neither to bury pacifism nor to praise it. Instead, in demythologizing pacifism, I hope to temporalize – and thereby humanize – it. As it is better situated in history (or, more properly, situated within a reflexively attentive theological vision of how traditions move through time), the Christian witness to nonviolence simultaneously expresses greater fidelity to a religious vision shaped by incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection and offers more relevance to the way that vision expresses its prophetic hope for the future.

More importantly, I argue that the myth of return that drives the conventional narrative fails not only to do justice to the rich, complex, and human tradition of nonviolence in the history of Christian thought but to adequately locate itself within the scope of God's work in time. Having offered a narrative of discontinuity that is sustained by a myth of return, the pacifist tradition struggles to account for divine activity during

periods when the tradition seemingly wanes or among non-pacifist communities. In a richer theological vision of God's work in time, we might recognize that every practice and idea – including those associated with the most rigorous of pacifist ethics – is still but a dim expression of life with God and that all practices and ideas remain in need of transformation. The distance between a Christian ethic that allows for violence and one that doesn't is far less than the distance between any Christian ethic and the politics of the Kingdom of God. Because the tradition is human, it is judged and found wanting. And, paradoxically, because God is already at work transforming the world, the distance between a Christian ethic that allows for violence and one that doesn't is far greater than the distance between any ethic and the actions of God, as God works both in and through the persons and communities that live out those ethics. Because God acts through the tradition, it is hope-filled beyond imagining – and it need not, therefore, rely on a myth of return to justify its continued significance.

Yet what is the form of my arguments?

This book walks through the history of the Christian church's advocacy of nonviolence with an eye to how such advocacy and, particularly, the myths that have encrusted it have been shaped by a particular vision of time. This journey occurs in three parts. The first part of this journey will focus on the first several centuries of the church's advocacy of pacifism, ending roughly with Constantine's rise to power. It is to the insights of the church during these centuries that post-Constantinian and contemporary Christian pacifists regularly return as both sources of authority upon which to found their narrative of the pacifist tradition and as evidence for the enduring significance of that tradition for the contemporary church. Whether these centuries can carry the weight placed upon them, though, is a question in need of answer. Chapters 1 through 3 attempt to answer that question. In Chapter 1, I argue that the evidence of the pacifist church before the end of the second century is more ambiguous than the conventional narrative of the history of Christian pacifism will support, but that such ambiguity need not undermine the significance of that period for understanding Christian pacifism. In Chapter 2, I argue that the reasons that at least some portions of the church in the second and third centuries were pacifist are morally troubling but that such moral failings need not function only as an indictment of the early church's pacifism. And in Chapter 3, I argue that the values and visions that would shape the fourth-century church's embrace of war are, in part, the product of the third-century pacifist church's approach to