

American Nonviolence

The History of an Idea

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The Anabaptists

The idea of nonviolence in the United States has deep roots in Christianity. Before the twentieth century, virtually everyone in the United States who chose the path of nonviolence was a Christian. Such individuals chose that path because they understood it as the truly Christian way of life. Throughout the twentieth century, Christianity continued to be the foundation for most nonviolent individuals and organizations. Although it is certainly possible to live a life of principled nonviolence without being a Christian, it is not possible to understand nonviolence in the United States without understanding its Christian origins.

Christian nonviolence began with the beginnings of Christianity. According to the book of Matthew in the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth preached nonviolence. In a sermon that Christians call the Sermon on the Mount (chap. 5), he told his followers that good behavior is not enough. They must have perfect love in their hearts, for everyone: “Do not resist an evildoer. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . . You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” There is no way to know for sure whether Jesus actually said these words. But since the early Middle Ages, the Christian tradition has been unanimous in affirming that he said them and in considering them Sacred Scripture.

Yet that hardly settled the question of the proper Christian attitude toward violence. The question was debated from the religion’s earliest days. Some Christians served in the Roman army, for example, whereas others refused on religious grounds. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, most European Christians came to consider violence quite compatible with their religion. After all, the empire was not likely to disband its army. The great theologian Augustine of Hippo, writing in the early fifth century, gave the Roman Catholic Church its classic justifications for violence, which was permitted only under the stringent conditions

he laid out. Of course, practice did not always follow theory. Christians committed plenty of violent acts that did not conform to Augustine's rules. But Roman Catholics had no theological basis for ruling out violence completely.

Occasionally, however, small groups arose that did commit themselves to strict nonviolence. Their idea of true Christianity was to return to "primitive Christianity," the religion of Jesus and his disciples. So they tried to live according to Jesus' literal words, as they understood them. That included perfect love and nonviolence. These groups remained rather marginal and had relatively little influence until the great turning point of modern Christianity, the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation began with the teachings of Martin Luther. In 1517, Luther announced that true Christians do not need to gain God's grace through rituals administered by priests. Many priests had abused their authority, so people were quite ready to listen to Luther's ideas. But he did not base his complaint on the abuses; he did not say priests should behave better and then regain their authority. Rather, he rejected the theoretical basis for the priesthood. Grace comes through faith, he proclaimed. Faith is a direct relationship between the individual Christian and God. Actions or "works," including actions of priests, have nothing to do with it. Therefore, there is no need for priests at all. God's word as recorded in the Bible is the only necessary link between the Christian and God. The Bible alone is sufficient to create and maintain that link, as long as an individual can read the Bible and learn how to interpret it. By understanding the Bible through faith, and living in God's grace, every Christian can know what Christ wants and live a Christlike life.

Luther's teachings set off a storm of new religious ideas and religious movements throughout northern Europe. The 1520s was a decade of immense religious creativity. Among the most radical of the reform movements (that is, those that departed most from Roman Catholicism) were the groups that came to be known as Anabaptists. They initiated a tradition of Christian principled nonviolence that continues to this day. In a very broad sense, the Anabaptists were the source of virtually all Christian nonviolence in Europe and the United States since the sixteenth century. More specifically, the Anabaptists are still the source of particular churches known as the historic peace churches. The best known of these in the United States include the Mennonites, the Hutterites, and the Amish. These churches continue in their commitment to nonviolence, rooted in Anabaptist principles.

Anabaptist Religion

Anabaptism began in Switzerland in 1523. Historians have traced many sources for this movement. But it seems that they all centered on one main

issue: a radical commitment to Luther's idea that the Bible is the only source of religious truth. Even more than Luther and other Reformation leaders, the Anabaptists reject any kind of clergy or official religious authority. They believe that every individual reading the Bible is, and should be, free to find the truth. They turn especially to the New Testament to find truth. Unlike some other early Protestant groups, they count the Bible even more important than logical reasoning or direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit. However, they do allow some role for the Spirit (and, to a lesser degree, reason) in finding the correct interpretation of the Bible.

Bible interpretation is the central form of religious experience for Anabaptists. They believe that the truth of the Bible emerges from a process of active cooperation between God and the individual Christian. This idea solves two problems at one time: What is the true way to relate to God? What is the correct source and form of religious authority? For Anabaptists, the answer to both is found in radical individualism. They are convinced that a right relationship with God gives them a new kind of life, free from the authority of priests and traditional institutions. Their radical individualism naturally engenders many disputes about the particulars of belief and practice. Historically, these disputes often led groups to splinter off and create new churches. So it is difficult to make many valid generalizations about Anabaptism. But from the earliest days, Anabaptists seem to have agreed on certain general points.

Anabaptists do not reject every aspect of Roman Catholic tradition. For example, they accept the doctrine of original sin. But they do not believe that the stain of sin can be absolved by a priest's sacramental rituals. It takes a spiritual transformation in the individual, which only God can bring about. When offered God's grace, the person can accept it by confessing his or her sin and receiving the Spirit. But this must be a free and voluntary choice. The Anabaptists teach that all true faith comes from the combination of God's free gift and the individual's free choice. Therefore, it is always wrong—and foolish—to try to coerce others into true faith, because it cannot be done anyway. It is right to combat false religion through preaching and example, but never through force.

For the same reason, Anabaptists argue, it is wrong to baptize an infant, as Roman Catholics do. An infant can make no conscious choice. Since the infant's receiving of the Spirit is not a voluntary act, it cannot be a source of true faith. Only an adult has the full freedom and consciousness to choose to become a genuine Christian. To show their staunch commitment to this belief, the first Anabaptists (who had been baptized in infancy as Catholics) rebaptized one another. Hence their name, Anabaptists, which literally means "rebaptizers," that is, people who are baptized again. For the Anabaptists it is necessary to choose, as an adult, to be reborn. Yet they

see baptism not as a sacrament to obtain God's grace but rather as a symbol that they have already received grace.

For Anabaptists, the true Christian church is a community of individuals who have chosen to accept grace, which means accepting Jesus Christ as their savior. Each member is equal to all others, because each is in direct contact with God. Each church is independent of all others, too. Each elects its own leaders. There is no professional clergy and no church hierarchy. In this way they see themselves imitating the original disciples of Jesus, witnessing for their faith and preaching it to others with no formal organization. They believe, as the book of Revelation promises, that Christ will come again to redeem the world. (The earliest Anabaptists generally believed that the Second Coming would be very soon.) But that belief is not as central for most of them as for other radical Reformation movements. Instead, they usually stress their desire to re-create, in their own lives, the primitive church of Jesus and the apostles. Whether they emphasize the future or the past, however, Anabaptists agree on the need for a radical break with the present, a life totally different from the way most people live today.

The first Anabaptists intended to re-create all of Christianity according to their model. Within a very short time, they saw that this was not going to happen. They rapidly changed their focus and began trying to bring individual Christians into their fold. They created what they called gathered churches, meaning that they gather together outside of the mainstream Christian churches. Like most Protestants, Anabaptists reject the idea of having monasteries, where the most devoutly religious people live apart from the ordinary world. But they all commit themselves to being devoutly religious; they try to bring the intense spirituality of the monastery into their daily lives in the world. While some Protestants view the church primarily as an invisible, spiritual entity, Anabaptists stress the visible church, a collection of specific people in a specific place and time. So they are concerned about creating a better social structure in the real history of this world. They aim to create an alternative to the mainstream Protestant religion and to the dominant society, to show in their lives what a better society would look like.

The question is how to do so. The Anabaptists agree with other Protestants that all people are sinners, that the only antidote to sin is God's grace, and that grace can be attained only through faith, not through works. But Anabaptists put special stress on the power of faith to produce good works and a more moral life. Although they agree that no one can ever be perfect, they are guided by the concluding injunction of the Sermon on the Mount: "You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." They strive for

perfection; they view their church as the visible body of Christ, which must be, and can be, a “spotless congregation.” As one of their greatest early leaders, Meno Simmons, said: “The reborn willfully here sin no more.”

Anabaptists claim that, because they have voluntarily chosen to follow Christ as their only authority, they can attain a higher moral level than others. Their ideal is to obey God’s commands out of love, not fear of the law or human authorities. Their moral code is based on Christ’s commandment to follow his example by showing love and sacrificing for one another. As Anabaptists understand it, that means sacrificing their own selfish desires in favor of serving others. Because they feel called upon always to serve others, they also feel called upon always to be willing to suffer for others. Christ’s example of self-sacrifice is their model. So their goal is to choose always to treat other people lovingly. They base their ethics on this ideal of freely choosing the way of love rather than on obedience to an external authority. Their church is intended to be a community based on love relationships, in which harmony is to be the general rule, not the exception.

Anabaptist churches are not free of conflict. In fact, their individualism ensures that they will always have to deal with considerable internal dissension. Because they want their church to be pure, they feel it necessary to impose discipline in their own community. But they must observe the principle that religion cannot be a matter of compulsion or externally imposed authority. So they cannot force anyone to act differently. Therefore, discipline is carried out first through warnings and then through the ban (ostracism). Critics have said that Anabaptists actually use the ban to act out their aggressions indirectly. But in principle, at least, the ban is never supposed to mean withdrawing love. And the community should always be ready to take back banned persons, if they repent.

Anabaptist Nonviolence

This brief sketch has already suggested why Anabaptists are committed to strict nonviolence. There was some debate about this among the earliest Anabaptists. But after a short time, most of them agreed to principled nonviolence, which became the fundamental stand and hallmark of the movement. Taking the New Testament as the source of all truth, they had to accept all of its teachings, including the injunction not to resist evildoers. Trying to imitate the life of Christ, they had to strive to love everyone, including their enemies. Believing that they were living in a state of grace, they felt themselves capable of attaining such a high moral standard. Their

ideal was to overcome all traces of sin and selfishness. Since violence is always an effort to impose one's own self and selfish desires on others, it had to be rejected. These are the obvious sources of Anabaptist nonviolence, the ones that adherents to the movement are quick to explain.

Some historians suggest that the sources of nonviolence were more complicated. In 1527, Anabaptist leaders met in the Swiss town of Schleitheim to agree on a statement of principles for their movement, known as the Schleitheim Confession. When it comes to nonviolence, the Schleitheim Confession certainly mentions their desire to imitate Christ's perfect love. But this is a relatively minor theme. The text explains the commitment to nonviolence in the context of a larger principle: separation from the world.¹

The Confession explains that all of reality is divided into two mutually exclusive categories: "For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who have come out of the world." According to the Confession, the world is mired in sin; therefore it is dark and impure. That is why Anabaptists must reject participation in everything worldly and gather in their own separated, pure communities. Only the believers, who have separated themselves from the world, can "walk in the obedience of faith" and do God's will. God's will is for a life of perfect love.

After explaining all this, the Confession continues that "therefore" Anabaptists must have nothing to do with the state and/or government, because they are manifestations of the sinful world. The principal mark of the state is its constant use of "the sword"—violence—to enforce its laws. Since an Anabaptist may not participate in the state or anything worldly, an Anabaptist may not use the sword or any "unchristian devilish weapons of force." The Confession generalizes from this principle to forbid all forms of violence.

So it seems that the early Anabaptists rejected violence not only in order to live a Christlike life but also to manifest their total rejection of the world and its status quo. They were intent on making everything different in the world, overturning all existing norms. Since the worldly people hated their enemies, the Anabaptists would imitate Christ and love their enemies. Since the worldly people used violence, the Anabaptists would take the opposite route and observe strict nonviolence. Nonviolence and rejection of "the world" were two sides of the same coin; each required the other.

At the same time, of course, they were also signaling their rejection of all external authority. They would not allow any official, whether of church or state, to enforce religious truth. They would accept only the truth that God would give to them through their interpretation of the Bible. In a larger sense, the Anabaptists were rejecting the essence of state authority: its use

of violence to impose control over the populace. Their commitment to non-violence reflected their willingness to renounce all efforts at control of others. In rejecting the world, they were rejecting all hierarchical structures of authority in favor of a more egalitarian way of life.

The Schleithem Confession goes on to say something that may seem contradictory at first: “The sword is ordained by God.” In other words, God wants the “magistrates”—the government officials—to use violence. God has appointed the magistrates to “guard and protect the good” people from violence and to punish criminals. He approves of the magistrates’ violence, if they use it for these righteous purposes. This is not a contradiction, however, when understood from the Anabaptist point of view. The full text reads: “The sword is ordained by God outside the perfection of Christ.” In other words, the world is full of sin, and it will be until the Second Coming of Christ. There is nothing anyone can do to change that. So God, in his mercy, has made sure that some sinners, the magistrates, will use their sin to control the worst excesses of other sinners. But the magistrates are still in the world, the realm of darkness and sin, outside “the perfection of Christ.” Thus they are far from where the Anabaptists dwell. The magistrates’ “houses and dwellings remain in this world, but the Christians’ citizenship is in heaven.”

The Confession stresses that Anabaptists, who live “inside the perfection of Christ,” must withdraw totally from all sin. This is how Anabaptists interpret the words of Jesus in the New Testament: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” There is an absolute opposition between God’s will and the worldly government. One must choose between them. The Anabaptist choice is to be gathered out of the world, to have nothing to do with sin, the government, or violence. They also stress that, since true religion must be a totally voluntary matter, the state can neither establish nor enforce rules pertaining to religion.

Although this attitude toward violence is logically consistent, historians suggest that it was actually the product of a complicated historical situation in early Anabaptism. When the movement began, it generally attracted poor peasants and craftspeople. Most of them rarely had any positive experiences with magistrates, so they saw no value in them. Occasionally, though, some were treated well by local officials. In some instances, for a short time, it looked as if their movement might become powerful enough to take over local governments. For these reasons, they were led to say that it was permissible, perhaps even desirable, to obey the government. Some made a compromise and said that it was permissible to be involved with government as long as they did not have to use violence. Yet the Schleithem Confession shows that the movement as a whole rejected this compromise, because

it assumed that anyone involved with government would inevitably end up using, supporting, or at least tolerating violence.

One more factor profoundly affected Anabaptism and its attitude toward violence: massive persecution. When Anabaptism began, governments and upholders of the status quo saw the movement as a serious threat. Perhaps Anabaptists were a threat, for a very short time, when they hoped to get all Christians to accept their radical views. But they very quickly gave up trying to change their society. Their absolute dualism meant that they had no hope of improving society as a whole. They wanted nothing more than to be left alone and to be allowed to preach their message. Once they made this clear, it would seem that there would be no reason to fear or persecute them.

But the early Anabaptists lived in an era of radical social change. There were serious revolutionary movements brewing among the lower classes. Since most Anabaptists came from the lower classes, and they were clearly independent thinkers given to unorthodox views, it was easy enough to suspect them of being somehow associated with revolution. In fact, some of them may have been involved in the 1525 Peasants' Revolt. But once the movement opted for nonviolence, the link between them and revolution was broken. (A few skeptical historians suggest that the Schleithem Confession's rejection of violence may have been intended as a message to the governments: since Anabaptists would not use violence, they should not be suspected of involvement in revolution, and so should not be victims of antirevolutionary repression.)

The Anabaptists did continue to represent a threat, however, in a more subtle way. European society assumed that a strong state, linked to a single unifying religion, was necessary for social order. The Protestant Reformation challenged the precise nature of state and religion, but few Protestants questioned the basic premise that state and religion had to work together to keep society intact. The Anabaptists did question this premise. They wanted to separate religion from the state and create total freedom of religious choice. In this sense they threatened the foundations of the existing order. So it is understandable that they were persecuted.

Apparently the supporters of the status quo felt extremely threatened, because they subjected the Anabaptists to amazingly fierce persecution. In the movement's early years, every Anabaptist knew that he or she might well be the victim of torture and murder. New Anabaptists understood that they would not, in fact, withdraw physically from the world and its risks. They would join a gathered community that understood itself to be spiritually separated. But they would be expected to go out into the world, to witness, to preach, and thus to risk more persecution. Many Anabaptists

ended up as martyrs to their faith. Martyrdom became a major theme in Anabaptism. For a movement dedicated to the imitation of Christ, it was easy to accept and sometimes even glorify martyrdom as the fullest evidence of faith. Martyrdom could be the strongest statement of rejecting the status quo at any cost. It was the ultimate way of withdrawing from the world.

Persecution confirmed the Anabaptists' belief that the world is inherently immoral, that all worldly people act upon their selfish desires and therefore are prone to violence. Since most of the persecutions were organized and carried out by government officials, they also confirmed the belief that magistrates would inevitably use the sword. In the long run, persecution intensified the dualism of the Anabaptists. They translated the moral dualism of good versus evil behavior into the religious dualism of the godly versus the ungodly and faith versus sin. To the Anabaptists, the magistrates and the worldly were not merely people who did evil acts; they were evil in their essence, embodiments of a cosmic principle of evil. This reinforced the Anabaptists' determination to withdraw from everything having to do with the world and its prevailing status quo. The further they withdrew, the more they were persecuted, confirming their dualistic view. This cycle created a physically dangerous but spiritually meaningful and comforting structure for Anabaptist life.

This cycle also confirmed the Anabaptists' commitment to renounce the violence of the world. Necessity—the fact that Anabaptists were powerless and could not fight back effectively—became a virtue. Anabaptists became even more convinced that, although they might have to die for their faith, they could and would never kill, or use any kind of force, even for the sake of God. As thousands died without fighting back, the commitment to non-violence gave spiritual meaning to persecution and martyrdom.

The powerful example of martyrs dying for their faith may have helped to bring others to Anabaptism. No doubt the example made it easier for others to continue in their faith, despite the risk that they too would become martyrs. But the positive value placed on martyrdom can hardly be the whole explanation for the movement's survival and success amid such dangerous conditions. Its success seems to show that there are always people willing to die for the sake of the truth, people to whom truth matters infinitely. What is most impressive about the Anabaptists is their commitment to die for truth, but never to kill for truth. They made that commitment because they were true to their original impulse of freedom from authority. If all people should be free to find God's truth in their own way, and if that freedom is worth dying for, then all forms of compulsion and coercion must be rejected as contrary to God's will.

The Anabaptists in History

The persecution of the Anabaptists gradually diminished. Their descendants spread around the world and formed the various historic peace churches. Wherever they went, however, they remained socially marginal; they were unconventional people and were treated as such. That hardly surprised them. Their beliefs prepared them to assume that they would be outsiders and to want that status. Why should anyone want to be inside a society that is thoroughly sinful and pervaded by violence? The historic peace churches also assumed that the larger society would remain sinful and violent. Therefore it made no sense to work actively to improve the larger society. In that sense they were politically passive, and many have remained so (though some became more active in the twentieth century). Some interpreters have concluded that Anabaptism is inherently nonpolitical.

Others, though, challenge this view. They say that Anabaptism is essentially a movement of revolt against the status quo and therefore always has a political dimension. Anabaptists are always preaching their message to the world at large, even at the risk of persecution. So they are not fleeing the world. On the contrary, they are challenging the world to look at itself from a new, perhaps more objective perspective. And they are insisting that every individual is free to discover truth and to choose a new path in life. They are making a powerful social and political statement about the nature of authority and the need to take responsibility for one's own truth, regardless of consequences. They are also modeling a way of life that wholly rejects violence. In these ways Anabaptists may be demonstrating a new form of social action. Yet it remains true that the history of nonviolence in the modern Western world began with people who saw little, if any, hope for changing the world through direct political action.

Anabaptists first came to North America in the late seventeenth century. The largest number of early immigrants were Mennonites, who settled in Pennsylvania. The Amish in Pennsylvania were another important group of Anabaptists arrivals. In the nineteenth century other waves of Mennonites came from Switzerland and Russia and settled in the Midwest, along with another Anabaptist group known as the Hutterites. These groups were joined by others that were similar in form, though not technically Anabaptist: the Church of the Brethren (known as Dunkers), the Church of the United Brethren (Moravians), the Schwenckfelders, the Shakers, and others. All of these groups have been called, collectively, the historic peace churches. Until the twentieth century, they generally stayed out of political involvement or movements for social change. Some of them still maintain that strictly apolitical stance today.

All of the historic peace churches held it against their Christian principles to serve as combatants in the armed forces. Until World War I, virtually every recorded act of conscientious objection was grounded in some version of Christianity. The objection was almost always to war in any form. The idea of a “selective” conscientious objector (CO), one refusing to fight in a particular war because it is immoral, was almost unknown. Before the twentieth century, it was always possible for men who were drafted to serve as noncombatants or to hire a substitute. Many chose one of those options. If their conscience did not permit either route, they were typically fined. If they refused to pay, their property was seized instead. Only those already drafted into the service who refused to obey orders were likely to face prison.

In the years through the Civil War the fate of each CO depended much more on the individual whim of people in authority (though the COs would have called it divine Providence) than on the dispassionate application of systemic rules. Indeed, there were few efforts to develop systemic rules until the Civil War, when both sides legislated some relief for COs (more in the North than in the South). During the two world wars, most COs were still members of historic peace churches. By then, there were more formal rules in place to offer them alternative service. But significant numbers served time in prison.

The need to make concrete decisions in wartime raised a virtually endless series of theoretical questions: Can Christians hire someone else to do their killing for them? Can Christians train with the militia, though they would not actually engage in battle? Can they do nonlethal service for the military (building forts, driving wagons, and so forth)? Can they refuse all service but willingly pay the required fine? Can they refuse to pay the fine but willingly give the state their property in place of the fine? Can Christians pay taxes used to support military activities? Can they refuse service to the state but use lethal weapons for immediate self-defense? Can they violate their own conscience and conform to the majority will of their fellow-religionists for the sake of congregational unity?

Such questions were debated widely and thoughtfully in the historic peace churches. Few of the members were religious fanatics who read in their Bible “turn the other cheek” and let it go at that. They were much more likely to explore all the nuances of the issues and come up with every imaginable answer to the questions. Some were quite narrow-minded. But most tended to think the issues through carefully, thoroughly, and independently. Many could see opposing views as equally valid. Sometimes they even recorded their own doubts and changes of opinion.

Because peace churches generally kept a distance from the rest of society, their witness of nonviolence had little effect on the larger society through the early twentieth century. That began to change during the two world

wars, when those who were imprisoned came into contact with other jailed COs who were not members of the peace churches. Through this contact, the peace church tradition influenced the other traditions of nonviolence thinking and activism that will be described in this book. By the late twentieth century, many peace church members were actively engaged in using nonviolent means to pursue social change. They became full participants in the broader stream of the nonviolence movement. However, some still kept apart from society and held to nonviolence strictly as a matter of personal spiritual purity.