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# Reckoning in Mennonite Peace Theology: Reinhold Niebuhr's Realism and Four Waves of Development

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**Abstract:** This article sketches four waves of Mennonite peace theology—nonresistance, transformation, reckoning, and responsibility—by recapitulating the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr's realism in their development. The first wave accepted Niebuhr's distinction between nonresistance and nonviolence and chose the former (Guy Franklin Hershberger). The second wave was realistic about the self-interest of the state but tended not to be realistic about Christian pacifist groups, at least not in the Niebuhrian sense of accepting sin as a permanent factor in history in the Christian communities they conceptualized and the vision inspiring peacebuilding beyond churches (John Howard Yoder and John Paul Lederach). The third wave is realistic about the church, interrogating and reckoning with sin in Anabaptist church histories, institutions, and communities (Malinda Berry). The emerging fourth wave carries forward elements of the three other waves in the course of developing movements exercising self-critical responsibility. The grassroots movement Mennonite Action is a "front light" of this fourth wave.

AROUND THE GLOBE, MENNONITES ARE KNOWN FOR PROFESSING adherence to the way of peace. This commitment takes various expressions: church agencies' peace programing; community-based models of peace activism; multilevel peacebuilding, peace centers and degree programs; and peace theology. Peace theology is narrative typology and interpretation of Christian theological ethics rooted in a particular pacifist ecclesiology, eschatology, and meaning of history. Mennonite peace theology is not one thing but plural.

In this article, I describe three waves of peace theology: nonresistance, transformation, and reckoning. There are substantial differences among them. Each wave has advocates in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The content and approach of each are informed by theological ethical traditions of pacifism and service (or accompaniment), as well as the ground-level experiences and relationships such traditions facilitate. Reckoning, I will argue, is a necessary form of peace theology;

it illuminates the importance of critical self-reflection in a time of disillusionment with the church and Christianity and sets new parameters for peace witness, including constructive interventions for "justpeace" in practice and theory. Yet a narrow focus on reckoning carries forward perfectionist habits of thought emphasized in nonresistance. Contemporary efforts integrate elements of all three waves, suggesting that we may be on the front end of a fourth wave—responsibility. The emerging fourth wave emphasizes self-reflective and power-conscious responsibility, urging Anabaptists to reckon with their historical complicity in colonialism, nationalism, and antisemitism while reaffirming their legacy of resisting the entanglement of church and imperial power. It advances a strategic, prospective engagement through pluralistic, grassroots partnerships that mobilize for societal and political transformation, guided by a realist understanding of both church and society through retelling Mennonites' story.

Charting the contours of these four waves is but one among many possible approaches to peace theology. This article traces how voices from the waves respond to the work of US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. The difference between the waves and the internal coherence of various dimensions of each become clear in the light of Niebuhr's criticism and arguments. Niebuhr provides an incisive analytical lens for examining peace theology insofar as his criticism of pacifism shaped the development of Mennonite peace theology formulations. His arguments were premised on the theological conviction that the law of loving one's enemies was not an achievable collective aim in a sinful world. Enemy love and turning the other cheek were not realistic.

This article recapitulates the influence of Niebuhr's realism in the development of peace theologies. The first wave accepted Niebuhr's distinction between nonresistance and nonviolence and chose the former, which Niebuhr considers consistent with the love taught by Jesus and possible for those disengaged from the real world of politics. The second wave was realistic about the self-interest of the state but tended not to be realistic about Christian pacifist groups, at least not in the Niebuhrian sense of accepting sin as a permanent factor in history in the Christian communities they conceptualized and the vision inspiring peacebuilding beyond churches. The third wave is realistic about the church, interrogating and reckoning with the sin in Anabaptist church histories, institutions, and communities. The fourth wave is realistic about society and the church, priming synthetic thinkers for self-reflective, deliberate power-building to exercise a new form of responsibility.

## WHY WAVES?

The four waves of peace theology are best understood neither as phases of evolutionary development in which the ideas and postures are fully formed or self-standing, nor as mutually exclusive generations. Rather, they are heuristic devices referring to ethical approaches that emerge as corrective and contribute to Anabaptist peace theology and theological thought more generally. They therefore offer a multi-focal lens and cast a vision for a plurality of responses to violence for those aspiring to ways of peace.

Let me begin with a word on the metaphor of waves. *Wave* is an interpretative framework shaped by historical circumstances and assumptions.[1] Some think of waves in terms of posts by which to measure the distance between them.[2] The notion of *generation* might also be used to talk about different interpretive frames and emphases, yet it is limiting if defined solely in relation to age or a given historical period. The wave image facilitates thinking about multiple waves moving into each other or existing alongside each other. It facilitates thinking comparatively as well as about how different environments and circumstances not just produce but *call* for different resources and responses, often in a single lifetime or generation. Waves helpfully facilitate cross-generational discussions of interpretative frames and emphases; in this sense, waves could also be called "political generations." In this interpretative approach, the waves of peace theology trace ideas about the presence or absence of sin (or violence) in the church and the church's relationship to sin (or violence) in the world.

Sketching the different waves sheds light on the historical disregard of marginalized voices within North American Mennonite communities and the increasingly globalized community concentrated in the Global South. It demonstrates how different communities receive peace theology legacies and contribute to them. It also highlights the usefulness of cross-wave conversations. I am a white North American Mennonite cisgender, heterosexual woman who worked in Latin American peacebuilding for nearly a decade before doing doctoral work (moral theology and peace studies) in a Catholic university, influenced by students from the Global South who feel othered by

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[1] My sketch of waves of theology is prodded by David Cramer, who identified me as a part of what is here named the second wave, and Gerald P. McKenny, who identified my work as third generation peace theology, signaling the first three developed here. For Cramer's use of "waves" analysis, see his "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," *Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 3 (2013): 255–273.

[2] Els Maeckelberghe, "Across the Generations in Feminist Theology: From Second to Third Wave Feminisms," *Feminist Theology* 8, no. 23 (2000): 63–69.

twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century peace theology and peace studies. My account is appreciative and critical of the first three waves, which themselves continue to develop, and eager to see the construction of the fourth wave.

## Reinhold Niebuhr's Moral Realism and Mennonites

US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once espoused Christian nonviolence and was for a time Chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). The FOR was the leading liberal Christian pacifist organization in the United States that emerged during World War I. In the early 1930s Niebuhr rethought his position; the Japanese incursions in China became the case study in global politics in which his position visibly shifts.[3] In the years that followed, he developed positions associated with Christian realism and became the twentieth century's most articulate critic of what was called at the time "liberal pacifism," the leading Christian social ethicist in the United States, and a widely respected advisor to policy makers.

Niebuhr opens his 1940 *Christianity and Power Politics* with an essay titled "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist."[4] He poses a counter thesis to the claim that Christian pacifism is based upon "the law of love," the law of loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek.[5] Niebuhr considers this bad theology because it assumes that loving one's enemies is an achievable collective aim in a sinful world. His refutation of pacifism is based in what he calls moral realism. Christianity cannot be reduced to the "law of love" because, though Christ is the norm for every human, the fact that every human sins means that each person is also "a crucifier of Christ." Niebuhr's moral realism is premised on the Christian notion that evil in the human is real and has power, which creates a contradiction: we know we ought to love our neighbor, but it is not actually possible to do so because of the law written into our members (Rom 7:23), so we love ourselves more.[6] We alone cannot overcome the fault line of self-interest

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[3] Scott G. Davis, "Violence, Pacifism, and the Use of Force," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin (Oxford University Press, 2021), 453.
[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 1–32.
[5] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (Yale University Press, 1986), 103. Unless indicated otherwise, hereafter citations to this text refer to Brown's edition.
[6] Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 102–103.

running through the self,[7] and Christianity must take seriously "sin as a permanent factor in human history" whereas secularized versions of Christianity suggest there is some off-ramp from the sinfulness of human history.[8]

Rooted in this realism, for Niebuhr the pacifism of early twentieth-century religious liberals is heretical because it equates Christianity with "utopian illusions" of fulfilling the Kingdom of God on earth. This is an unrealistic political strategy of "heretical pacifism" derived not from the Gospel but secular culture. He distinguishes liberal pacifism from a task truly possible for comparatively few individuals and by small and apolitical sectarian groups, which declare themselves to live at a distance from the normal rules of political history, for example, Mennonites' nonresistant ethic rooted in the biblical witness. Niebuhr considers the Mennonite ethic consistent with the nonresistant love taught by Jesus. "It is this kind of pacifism that is not a heresy," Niebuhr says concerning "Protestant sectarian perfectionism (of the type of Menno Simons, for instance)":

> It is rather a valuable asset for the Christian faith; 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, making them too completely normative.[9]

If Mennonite pacifists do not try to participate in politics and are not self-righteous, they serve to prod the nation's conscience, to remind pragmatically-minded responsible people how they fall short because Jesus is the ultimate ethical ideal for all Christians who should be striving towards love. Niebuhr expects Mennonites to remain disengaged from the real world of politics, where compromise of the ethical ideal is necessary to effect change, and violence is an integral part of government.

Reading Niebuhr's essay are generations of students taking the course "Christian Attitudes Towards War, Peace, and Revolution" at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). This theological institution serves Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, and global Anabaptist organizations and communities. Three waves of response to the essay can be traced.

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[7] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 160 and 166.

[8] Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 103.

[9] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," in *Christianity and Power Politics*, 4.

## WAVE ONE: NONRESISTANCE, NONPARTICIPATION, AND SEPARATION

The first wave of peace theology was defined in the US by men of European descent. Between World War I and II, twentieth-century Mennonites largely lived in protective enclaves separated from what was considered "the world." This arrangement contributed to a dualistic outlook between the church and the world, or even between Mennonites and everyone else—including other Christians.

Various contextual and contingent influences led to the reaffirmation of this separation from the world and its theological formulation. First, there were WWI and WWII. Questions of military conscription forced the North American church to articulate a peace theology that would provide a firm foundation for nonparticipation in war. Conscientious objection is an important expression of this peace theology.[10]

Niebuhr's writings were another major impetus.[11] His criticism of pacifism was among the factors that led Mennonites to claim *nonresistance* (renunciation of warfare and coercive means for advancing ends). Influenced by Niebuhr's terms of debate, they adhered to the biblical mandate to "resist not" and espoused politically-aloof historical nonresistance, withdrawing into enclaves of political non-participation. They distanced themselves from a pacifism of nonviolence espoused by liberal Protestant and Gandhian pacifists, understood as a positive force capable of resisting violence and imbued in practices that can make social movements successful. Substantively agreeing with Niebuhr, they stressed the impossibility of being effective in history and rejected the illusion that social movements could change things in a sinful world.

First-wave thinkers are Niebuhrian realists in the sense that they agree with Niebuhr's dichotomy between nonresistance and nonviolence and simply choose the option of nonresistance. These Mennonites distinguished the pragmatic grounds of nonviolent pacifism (the position they were not defending) from the biblical and theological grounds of *nonresistance* (the position they championed).

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[10] Peter Brock, *Against the Draft: Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War*, 1st ed., Heritage (University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[11] Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Herald, 1994), 73; Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage* (University of Tennessee Press, 1996); John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Brazos, 2009), 343–418. Also, Graber Miller, "Mennonite Lobbyists in Washington," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15 (1995): 177–199.

This rejection of coercion and participation in non-loving struggles in the political order included critiquing labor organizing as "class warfare" and other Christians who tried to settle international disputes. Such nonviolent resistance, they argued, was inconsistent with New Testament teaching on nonresistant love and the example of Jesus whose life led to the cross, as would discipleship. Mennonites should focus on non-coercive acts of faith at the periphery of the political order: opposition to racial intolerance, regard for other minority groups, concern for religious liberty, simple living, nurturing healthy local communities, relief work, and social reconstruction.

US American Mennonite theologian and historian Guy Hershberger was a representative voice of nonresistance emphasizing love.[12] Hershberger declared, "The New Testament way is to aim at love, not justice. In aiming at justice, the result is frequently a selfish struggle for power, position, or wealth. In aiming at love, however, the result is often justice as well as love. But, if not, the Christian must continue to love anyhow, for according to the teaching of Christ, His disciples ought to suffer even injustice rather than forsake the way of love."[13] Hershberger's writing in *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* overshadowed the optimism of Mennonite progressives who used peace in positive and active ways as early as the 1920s.[14] Hershberger explicitly argued against Niebuhr's statement that adopting the ethic of Jesus made Mennonites social parasites who had opted out of social responsibility. Yet firmly grounded in two-kingdom theology, he distanced Mennonite efforts to follow Jesus's teachings of "nonresistant love" from Niebuhr's "heretical pacifism," and substantively accepted Niebuhr's categories when he insisted that "the New Testament way is to aim at love, not at justice" and remain content to let justice emerge as a side effect as the nonresistant Christian community follows "the way of love."[15] Importantly, Hershberger's strategy succeeded in its aim of binding different kinds of Mennonites together into a group with a vision of a faithful church.

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[12] Guy Franklin Hershberger opened his apology for nonresistance by distinguishing it from "Gandhi's program of nonviolence" which, he stated, "is sometimes confused with nonresistance, but it is really a form of warfare" (*War, Peace, and Nonresistance* [Herald, 1946], 1). See also John R. Mumaw, *Nonresistance and Pacifism* (Mennonite Publishing House, 1952), and Don E Smucker, "A Mennonite Critique of the Pacifist Movement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 20 (1946): 80–88.

[13] Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*, 49.

[14] For example, in an address to the Mennonite Church General Conference meeting in 1926, J. H. Langenwalter stated, "Every effort must be made to spread the idea of world peace as a practicable human effort; and to study the necessary conditions of peace." See Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 78.

[15] Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*, 53, 232–254.

Thus, the first wave can be summarized with the statement that God is at work in history creating the Kingdom by calling a separated people. Key first wave posts include a posture of withdrawal, church/world dualisms shaped by two-aeon eschatology (or two-kingdom theology), and emphasis on the cross. Its social change model is that of a light or city on a hill, set apart. Peace (meaning nonresistance) and love are key terms. Justice is often seen in a negative light: we can do justice from the hill but should not demand justice for ourselves. Authors assume that Mennonites operate from a nearly powerless position to shape society anyway. They rely on historical and theological methods to develop their arguments. Few drew on social scientific methods, which were generally epistemologically suspect.

### Wave Two: Transforming through Active Engagement in the World

In the post-war period, a contradiction unfolded, as the lived reality of Mennonites in the US did not match the theology of nonresistance. North American Mennonites separated from US culture because of the war (consistent with a non-resistant, separatist ethic), but sociological shifts occurred because of the new forms of engagement that emerged: civilian public service, higher education in university settings, movement from farms to cities, and participation in professional environments where Mennonites mingled with colleagues from different communities. During the wars, they saw that many were in need, not just Russian Mennonites (we will come back to this later). A service ethic became increasingly important; it sent them out of their own communities and churches. Service abroad and urban engagement combined with higher education raised awareness of social oppression and governmental power structures in diverse settings.[16]

Sociologically, these trends eroded the church/world dualism that supported two-kingdom theology. Mennonites—specifically those in urban areas and overseas—discovered many others who also opposed war and racial injustice. Additionally, Mennonites witnessed to the social and political changes of the 1960s and 1970s: the emergence of revolutionary movements worldwide, liberation theology in Latin America, the civil rights movement, protest against the war in Vietnam, and the second wave of feminism in the United States. By this time, North American Mennonites had more than seventy years of experience in mission work in various cultural and political settings

[16] Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 133–158, especially 134.

and almost fifty years of experience in Mennonite Central Committee peace and service work. These resulting historical experiences and relationships cultivated a sense of urgency to develop a peace theology explicitly attending to justice.

A series of theological postures moved beyond the dualism of sectarian idealism to an emphasis on actively engaging the world,[17] with *transformation* eventually emerging as the most compelling response for Mennonites contextually.[18] Second-wave Mennonite peace theologians and practitioner-scholars (Lawrence Burkholder, Gordon Kaufman, John Howard Yoder, Don Kraybill, Duane Friesen, and John Paul Lederach) emphasized God at work in history through transformation.[19] A deepened commitment to social engagement moved second wave advocates far beyond a sharp church/world dichotomy to explore ways the church can transform its surroundings. Distinct yet mutually invigorating theologies and disciplinary trajectories converged in this emphasis on transformation.

Second wave thinkers are Niebuhrian realists in their conceptual frameworks, especially in their thinking about the state. Rooted in eschatological and messianic categories, they theologize about contributing to just peace in specific historical contexts while affirming that just peace will never be fully realized. In Lederach's influential framing, "justpeace" is a horizon of expectation we can see and move

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[17] Gordon Kaufman developed a peace theology advocating for a nonviolent theological ethic centered on actively engaging with the world. In *The Context of Decision: A Theological Analysis* (Abingdon, 1961), he emphasized that loving one's neighbor means Christians should not shy away from difficult, ambiguous situations that could harm them physically or morally. Agreeing with Niebuhr, he argued that even if politics or war are seen as sinful, Christians must still confront them as part of their ministry of reconciliation, reject any strategy of withdrawal—often rooted in a self-serving kind of love—and instead embrace responsibility for the sinful situation. See also *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other Mennonite Essays* (Faith and Life, 1979). Kaufman's peace theology also influenced his understanding of "the nonresistance of God," explored in *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (Scribner, 1969), and shaped later work on Christology and religious pluralism. Agreeing with Niebuhr and against John Howerd Yoder, J. Lawrence Burkholder argued that Mennonites needed a theology for ambiguous situations of "tragic necessity" when no option seems "Christ-like." See Burkholder's 1958 doctoral thesis at Princeton University, "The Problem of Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church" (Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1989), and Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Peace Theology in Transition: North American Mennonite Peace Studies and Theology, 1906–2006," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1 (2007): 77.

[18] See David C. Cramer "Realistic Transformation: The Impact of the Niebuhr Brothers on the Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder (1)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88, no. 4 (2014): 67–104.

[19] John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991) is emblematic of second-wave peace theology, while including some chapters on first wave theologians as contrast points.

towards through processes of social transformation. Yet it is "just out of touch . . . leading us to pursue new ways of approaching human affairs," he writes in *Moral Imagination*.[20] Christian realism likewise holds that specific "social achievements" both remind us of our limits and reaffirm our hope.[21] In Niebuhrian terms, Jesus is the ideal, though moral dilemmas require compromises of that ideal to approximate relative justice. This does not produce moral timidity but rather courage and imagination. In contrast with the first wave, the call of the second wave is to plunge into the world of sin rather than withdraw from it, all the while maintaining the primary identity as faithful church distinguished from the violent state. Keith Graber Miller writes that at least since the 1970s, Mennonites involved in just peace work have been Niebuhrian realists about the self-interest of the state and the destruction caused by pursuit of US military and economic and political interests around the globe.[22]

The second wave does not identify with nonresistance and now accepts nonviolent resistance. This momentous development is visible in how second-wave peace theologians depart from Niebuhr on the question of violence. Niebuhr-the-realist accepts the use of force to push back greater evil. The second wave Anabaptist rejoinder asks whether engaging in violence diminishes the amount of evil and, David Cramer notes, argues that nonviolent peace initiatives are more effective than violent approaches to build just peace.[23] In contrast with first wave thinkers who distanced themselves from Gandhi, second wave thinkers believe that the politics modeled by Jesus *and* Gandhi, now referred to as nonviolence or nonviolent resistance, is more realistic. These thinkers were implicitly adopting and adapting the terms of the debate Niebuhr set forth while departing from his stance on violence and advocating for different forms of politics. Robust theoretical positions emerging from representatives of this wave resisted the assumption that the nation state is the primary agent of change in history. These approaches decisively contributed to changing the subject from the nation-state to Christian communities in the field of political theology. Inspired by second wave theologians, especially Yoder, Lederach broke theoretical ground in peace studies

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[20] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, reprint edition (Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.
[21] Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.
[22] Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents Innocent as Doves*, 60.
[23] David Cramer and Myles Werntz, *Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence* (Baker Academic, 2022), 77.

by changing the subject of politics from institutions and laws of the state to local communities and processes.[24]

Writers in this wave sought empirical verification for their minority position of social effectiveness from below. In contrast to first wave thinkers suspicious of social science, second wave thinkers used social science to ground arguments that nonviolence is more effective and economical and less destructive than lethal violence. Once this realism of nonviolence was discovered, first through the work of Gene Sharp, second-wave theologians distinguished the church from the rest of the world not by opaque walls but as a matter of progress along the historical arc of the universe. Yoder writes that the church is "the new world on its way," the world's pioneer, model, or paradigm the watching world can appreciate from its vantage point at the bottom of the curve of progress leading to the Kingdom of God.[25] The Christian community's practices are not fundamentally religious but rather "lay" and "public" phenomena,[26] which makes second wave peace theology a friendly dialogue partner in interdisciplinary peace studies conversations.[27]

Practitioner-scholar John Paul Lederach has been prompted by his experiences in conflict settings and the Mennonite tradition that shaped him to challenge the singular, linear view of history presumed in much of conflict resolution and some peacebuilding and peace studies.[28] Lederach articulated the notion of a creative, vulnerable, noncoercive social community of transformation with staying power, providing founding leadership to conflict transformation and peace-building from the ground up.[29] He has provided the most significant scholarly and practice-based leadership for the church and numerous behind-the-scenes situations in national and international settings

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[24] See the graph in John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (United States Institute of Peace, 1998), 78; see also Janna Hunter-Bowman and Heather DuBois, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford Press, 2015), 575.

[25] John Howard Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," in *The Royal Priesthood* (Herald, 1998), 372.

[26] Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 369–372.

[27] John Howard Yoder was on faculty at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, followed by John Paul Lederach and Lisa Schirch, whose transformation-oriented contributions include *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding: A Vision and Framework for Peace with Justice* (Good Books, 2005).

[28] Janna Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace: Becoming Agents Under Duress in Colombia* (Routledge, 2022); DuBois and Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding."

[29] DuBois and Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding."

where violent conflict had broken out or threatened to do so. What he calls an "Anabaptist/Mennonite religious-ethical framework" shaped his moral imagination and informs his theories.[30] A "legacy and compass" from Mennonites shaped his perception and experience in his extensive work in Central America and later the Horn of Africa and Nepal.[31] His emphasis on boundary-crossing and willingness to take risks are traced to the "enemy love" of a practical, concrete, and embodied theology of discipleship.[32] He links the distinctive time horizon of transformational frameworks to Mennonite theological notions of time, wherein the present and future overlap in the "already, not yet" kingdom of God.[33] "It is," he observes, "as various Anabaptist authors have coined in the titles of their books, the 'politics of Jesus' carried through a 'mustard seed conspiracy' in the 'upside-down kingdom.'"[34]

The second wave's realism of transformation through nonviolent engagement in the world is on display in a July 1993 hallway conversation at a US Institute of Peace conference in Washington, DC between John Paul Lederach and John Howard Yoder. Lederach was commissioned to write a paper titled, "Pacifism in Contemporary Conflict: A Christian Perspective." Yoder was the overall respondent to the interfaith conference on nonviolence. In a paper Lederach delivered nearly a decade later at the 2002 Believer's Church Conference at the University of Notre Dame, he recalled that Yoder provided a normative justification for the nonviolent peace force proposal he (Lederach) had just put forth. Yoder claimed that prodding governments to find new and nonviolent ways to secure the well-being of the populations they serve and prodding them to participate in reparations for the harmful consequences of their actions in the global South is not antithetical to Anabaptism. Rather, it is a vocation for those committed to living the Kingdom of God.[35] In contrast to first wave theology, now Mennonite peace theologies prod not the conscience of society to remind it of its imperfection but governments towards justice. Furthermore, the close relationship between peace/nonviolence theology and ecclesiology is on display. There is a

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[30] Lederach, *Little Book*, 4. See Lederach, "Journey from Resolution," 45.
[31] Lederach, *Journey Toward Reconciliation*, 15.
[32] Lederach, "Missionaries," 11–19.
[33] Lederach, "Pacifism in Contemporary Conflict: A Christian Perspective," johnpaul lederach.com/2023/03/pacifism-in-contemporary-conflict-a-christian-perspective/, 7. See also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972); Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* (Word Books, 1981); Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald, 1978).
[34] Lederach, "Pacifism." See also Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*; Sine, *Mustard Seed*; Kraybill, *Upside-Down Kingdom*.
[35] Lederach, "Recollections and the Construction of a Legacy."

shared sense that the free church is especially apt for creative nonviolence, exploring new horizons, because it is liberated from the status quo and worldly powers that try to rule the world through violence.

Whereas second wave thinkers tend to be realistic about the state, they tend not to be realistic about Christian pacifist groups, at least not in the Niebuhrian sense of accepting sin as a permanent factor in history in the Christian churches.[36] Churches claiming to live at a distance from rules of political history, to draw forward Niebuhr's distinction between the state and sectarian groups, often appeared instead as sites of "transcendent hope" in the world. Eschatology is John Howard Yoder's social theory. Throughout his corpus, Yoder wrote about the Christian community as a sociological entity that constituted a new cultural option, grounding this social theory in messianic apocalyptic categories.[37] "The relevance of a transcendent hope is sometimes that of a pioneer" or "pilot effort" that functions differently from "public agencies."[38] This political vision pairs realism about the state with a notion of the church as change agent and "site of ethical transcendence."[39] The notion of church as change-agent serves as shorthand for how, in Yoder's account, the church's messianic character endows it with its ethical transcendence and political nature that reaches beyond the politics of this world, which helps to shield it (and the powerful people in it, like Yoder) from external intervention and interrogation.[40] Yoder argues that the fault line of sin runs not through the human, as in Niebuhr's moral realism, but is rather a split in the cosmos.[41] Yoder depicts the community's ethical transcendence as cosmic.

In sum, the second wave stresses the possibility of transforming the world, despite its sinfulness. Peace is not about nonresistance but non-violent action and engagement, which realistically provides a better way to redress problems than warfare and seeks justice for those who are victims of evil. The transforming power of God is a central theme,

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[36] Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 103.

[37] Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "Constructive Agents Under Duress: Alternatives to the Structural, Political, and Agential Inadequacies of Past Theologies of Nonviolent Peacebuilding Efforts," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 149–168.

[38] John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution, The: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Herald, 2003), 163.

[39] See Isaac Samuel Villegas for this formulation in "The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse," *Modern Theology* 37, no. 1 (2021): 191–214.

[40] Hunter-Bowman, "Constructive Agents Under Duress."

[41] John Howard Yoder, "Peace Without Eschatology," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Eerdmans, 1994), 146.

affirming that God is at work in history redeeming the world, transforming it into the Kingdom. Resurrection (rather than the cross) and engagement (rather than withdrawal) are emphasized. The social change model is that of salt and leaven and cooperative partnerships, supported by multiple eschatologies (messianic, gradual, and realized). Justice is seen as a positive good, the key goal and possibility of social institutions. The second wave assumes that Christians are among those who can shape society.[42] Methodologically, second wave thinkers use more social science methods than do first wave thinkers, together with a critical awareness of the assumptions of those who define "reality" in the non-confessing world.

## WAVE THREE: RECKONING

African American pastor, scholar, and activist Vincent Harding, echoing second wave realism, urged Mennonite churches to be a "front light" on civil rights and social justice. Harding was situated between the Civil Rights Movement and the Mennonite community in the early 1960s. During 1963, the year he was most deeply involved with Mennonites, Harding grew increasingly exasperated by white Mennonites' reluctance to participate in civil rights protest. His call to be a "front light" carried an indictment: Mennonites should lead rather than playing the role of "rear light."[43] He apparently believed Mennonites had the capacity to hear because he repeatedly called them "to listen to Christ and our brothers and to seek to discern the Spirit's blowing of truth from whatever source" to understand "what a witness of non-resistance or Christian pacifism means in situations where men honestly sense that they have been pressed by oppression to violent resistance."[44] Harding recognized the Spirit's activity in Civil Rights

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[42] Mennonite congregations that offered church sanctuary to immigrants targeted for deportation during the first Trump administration often express their witness in key terms of second wave peace theology. For example, Isaac Samuel Villegas elegantly reflects on his congregation's experience providing sanctuary to Rosa del Carmen Ortez-Cruz in *Migrant God: A Christian Vision for Immigrant Justice* (Eerdmans, 2025). He cites Stanley Hauerwas's Yoderian notion that "the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic," adding "we are our ethical vision," to posit "protective sanctuary" as an expression of the church-as-alternative transforming society (92, 2): "Our life with Rosa was an expression of who we are as church, which was also a political proposal" (92).

[43] Meeting with the General Conference Board of Christian Service on December 4, 1963, as discussed by Tobin Miller Shearer, "Moving Beyond Charisma in Civil Rights Scholarship: Vincent Harding's Sojourn with the Mennonites, 1958–1966," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2 (2008): 213–248.

[44] C. J. Dyck, ed., *The Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Mennonite World Conference, 1997), 343.

and anticolonial movements.[45] He believed Mennonites' nonconformity prepared them to challenge US racism and global violence linking the Global North, where his audience resided, to the Global South.[46] He asked, "What is our peace witness when we live as citizens of the nations that make peaceful revolution impossible? We cannot escape such questions by saying that we do not believe in violence when we participate in the 'violence of the status quo.' Nor can we affirm law and order when they maintain a situation in which men rob another people cruelly, legally, and systematically and share some of the profits with us."[47] Harding uses first-person plural pronouns—we, us, ourselves—to talk about the Anabaptist community while calling it to new areas of noncooperation and engagement in the Black freedom struggle.[48] Despite this aptitude for noncooperation with racism, Harding witnessed a concerning tendency towards conformity. He declared, "We have loudly preached nonconformity to the ways of the world, and yet we have so often been slavishly and silently conformed to the American attitudes on race and segregation."[49] Harding saw the Mennonite church's capacity to do justice but found its inclination fell short. He pressed US Mennonites to engage in the Black freedom struggle and criticized their unprotecting embrace of white privilege. According to Miller Shearer, the Mennonite church then pushed out this prophet.[50] In his landmark *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*, historian Felipe Hinojosa further demonstrates that race discussions surrounding the actions of Harding and other African American, Latino, and Native American Mennonites in the twentieth century formed and redefined the identity and shared practices of Mennonites to a greater extent than discussions over peace and nonresistance,[51] contributing to "ethnic Mennonites" becoming "white Mennonites."[52] Shearer's careful documentation of criticism against Harding by his MCC supervisor, church members, and regional church leaders evidences the discrimination against Black preachers and conflictual nature of that reshaping process.[53] To

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[45] Dyck, *The Witness of the Holy Spirit*, 168–169, 337–344.

[46] Declaration of Commitment in Respect to Christian Separation and Nonconformity to the World, August 26, 1955, as cited by Tobin Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out: Vincent Harding and the Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 69 (2015).

[47] Vincent Harding, "The Peace Witness and Revolutionary Movements," *Mennonite Life*, 1967, 161–165, as cited by Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out."

[48] Vincent Harding, "The Peace Witness and Revolutionary Movements."

[49] Declaration of Commitment in Respect to Christian Separation and Nonconformity to the World.

[50] Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out."

[51] Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 12, 49–51, 204–17.

[52] Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 216.

[53] Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out." See also Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 118.

understand this struggled more deeply, we can turn to Niebuhr's insights.

*Reckoning with the Inclination to Injustice*

Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) provides an interpretive key: "Man's (sic) capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[54] Observing from his mid-twentieth century perch as a white US American Protestant preacher, Niebuhr saw his fellow humans' capacity to grasp and commit to justice, yet noted a prevalent inclination to injustice. He argued against those who take capacity as inclination, a reliable, stable tendency to do justice ("children of light"). For Niebuhr, the inclination was to injustice, asserting that the path from self-interest to common or general interest requires qualifying or renouncing self-interest.[55]

This modern articulation of individual and collective relationships illuminates how the US Mennonite community's inclination to injustice on race shaped its identity and peace stance in this period. A Niebuhrian lens reveals a majority European-descent community predisposed to self-interest, propelling it towards racialized superiority, whiteness, rather than renouncing self-interest for the general interest of justice.[56] US Mennonite leadership neither accepted Harding's invitation to self-reflection on race nor the responsibility to engage racial questions outside the church. Harding believed Mennonites had the ability to do justice, but Niebuhr would contend this was an idealistic view characteristic of "children of light." Between 1957 and 1963, Harding came to a painful realism about the sin of racism in the US American Mennonite church that existed alongside its peace stance and tradition of nonconformity.

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[54] Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 161.

[55] Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 175.

[56] There has been a long tradition within Black theological circles of engaging with the very questions Niebuhr did raise, Tobin Miller Shearer noted in a March 27, 2025, email exchange about a draft of this article. How might the historical dialectic of peace theology waves differ if thinkers ignored by Mennonite theologians had been conversation partners? He asks, "What, for example, would the work of Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, Pauli Murray (as both strategist and theologian), and King himself have to say to Mennonites had they engaged with them earlier?" How might Mennonites have engaged differently as custodians, reformers, and critics of peace theology traditions if they were key interlocutors rather than Niebuhr? Perhaps some student will pick up the question.

### ***Reckoning with Internal Failures and Systematic Violence***

Thus the third wave's core commitment is to reckoning, which involves interrogating and addressing a specific "problem *within us*."[57] This demands self-reflection on our internal capacity for injustice and an active engagement in the broader struggle for justice. Third wave thinkers, with a clarity that can breed cynicism if unworked, understand that previous waves of Mennonites, whether believing themselves separate from the world (wave 1) or agents of transformation (wave 2), coexisted with perpetrating evil. They intentionally cultivate the capacity for self-reflection Niebuhr's idealists lacked, acknowledging that Mennonites—past and present—have done evil even while seeking a new world, and are deeply enmeshed in systems of structural violence. Rather than merely subordinating power to law as Niebuhr suggested, third-wave thinkers develop resources to understand the flow of power within their communities (horizontally) and analyze historical power dynamics (vertically). They foster formational practices and relational networks to enhance the capacity for justice while actively confronting evil in the world.

Mennonites continued and continue to discover "problem(s) *within us*" and struggle to reckon with them. The compelling second-wave concept of transformation in armed conflict often obscures patterns enabling interpersonal violence and undermines the transformative community's ability to practice critical self-reflection. Victim-survivors of theologian John Howard Yoder's longstanding sexualized violence and abuse of power brought this sharply into focus. By 1992, at the chronological height of the second wave, women initiated a sea change, documented in "Peace Theology and Violence Against Women,"[58] by organizing against Yoder's refusal to stop abuse and submit to church accountability. [59] This horrendous situation makes it agonizingly clear that rejection of killing (wave one) and a free church peace community committed to transformation (wave two) can tragically coexist with other forms of violence—structural and direct (such as sexualized violence)—that are theologically sanctioned.[60]

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[57] Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out" (emphasis added).

[58] See documentation of the 1991 consultation held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the volume edited by Elizabeth G. Yoder, "Peace Theology and Violence Against Women," *Institute of Mennonite Studies Occasional Papers* 16 (1992).

[59] Rachel Goosen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (January 2015).

[60] Theological sanctioning is a form of cultural violence. For more extensive analysis, see Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "Constructive Agents Under Duress: Alternatives to the Structural, Political, and Agential Inadequacies of Past Theologies of Nonviolent

In Niebuhrian terms, realism about the state needs to be paired with realism about the church. Violence is not merely an external "world" problem; it operates within our spaces, institutions, histories, and is enabled by our normative theories. Those in the peace theology orbit are compelled to examine the forms of violence within Mennonite peace theology and witness. Malinda Berry's 2016 *Conrad Grebel Review* article "Shalom Political Theology" directly engaged Niebuhr for the third wave. Using Niebuhrian realistic theological anthropology (human nature defined by "self-interest, self-deception, anxiety, and hubris"),[61] Berry articulated a peace theology that "interrogate[s] and re-shape[s] the theo-ethical life of faith communities in ways that peace theology has not historically done."[62] Many scholars and practitioners, implicitly drawing on realism, are critically self-examining and constructively reworking elements of Mennonite traditions.

The third wave peace theology and praxis stressing reckoning accepts Niebuhr's insistence that *sin* is a key word in our theological vocabulary. Mennonites too are crucifiers of Christ,[63] drawing on his phrase, for Christ alone does not hurt what Christ touches. Third-wave voices contend that Mennonites cannot adequately speak in the terms of our inherited tradition of peace unless we grapple with the reality of violence (sin), including sexualized violence, systemic racism, and colonialism within us. Peace witness demands accountability, addressing power disparities, and reorganizing power in institutions and communities.[64] We are compelled to reckon with structural failures illuminated by those directly impacted and critical discourses around colonialism, anti-racism, antisemitism, feminism, and Yoder's failures specifically. While Yoder's work did call for reckoning with Constantinianism, third wave reckoning specifically names this self-critical, introspective turn towards Mennonite histories, institutions, and theology. In Niebuhrian terms, Yoder failed to adequately grapple with the inclination to injustice within the messianic community; his persistent unwillingness to renounce self-interest, even while critiquing Niebuhr to develop peace theology, incisively illustrates

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Peacebuilding Efforts," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 149–168.

[61] Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship," *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (2016): 60–61.

[62] Berry, "Shalom Political Theology," 52.

[63] Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,"102–103.

[64] Reckoning on the page is easier to examine and cite in an academic article than the messy work of reckoning in dynamic, living human communities. All the more valuable is Eliza Griswold's account of the painful work in the communal life of Philadelphia churches in *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024).

Niebuhr's point. Reckoning with internal failure, like Yoder's legacy, involves public lament and repentance. AMBS condemned as "evil" Yoder's abuse of women and its own institutional failure to intervene, issuing an institutional apology and committing to "transparency and fostering healing."[65] Survivors' discovery of shared experience and networks of female support animated the accountability process.[66] Reckoning with systemic violence involves actively reworking historical memory to unearth "originating sins" of Mennonite entanglements with colonialism, linked with historical trauma and traumatization in ethnic Mennonite family ancestry, typically of Central European descent.[67] Projects viewing the US as a settler-colonial project whose internal and external injustices are deeply intertwined reveal the relationships between internal failures and systematic injustices, including in Christian spaces and traditions. Pueblo (Tewa) descendant Sarah Augustine,[68] "Anablacktivist" Drew Hart,[69] and David Evans,[70] among others contributing to liberation and

[65] "Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Service of Lament, Confession, and Commitment," Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, March 23, 2015, ambs.edu/lament-and-apology/.

[66] As uplifted by Julia Feder, *Incarnating Grace: A Theology of Healing from Sexual Trauma* (Fordham University Press, 2023), 177–178. See also Goosen, "Defanging the Beast," 30–31; Goosen, "Mennonite Bodies, Sexual Ethics: Women Challenge John Howard Yoder," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 251–253.

[67] Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade, 2021). Berry draws on liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's notion of "originating sin" in "Shalom Political Theology." See also *Vision* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2019) on the theme "originating sins," edited by Berry.

[68] Sarah Augustine invites readers to follow Jesus to dismantle the effects of colonization, reasoning that "what was done in the name of Christ" through church legitimization and scriptural justification "must be undone in the name of Christ" (*The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* [Herald, 2021]).

[69] Drew Hart has depicted the Spirit working with Scripture to free the church from white supremacy and for the cause of Black liberation in *Trouble I've Seen*. Before him, in "Black and Mennonite," theologian Hubert Brown claimed the biblical and early Anabaptist mantle of the justice-seeking Spirit to challenge White Mennonites to embrace antiracist solidarity. Hubert L. Brown, *Black and Mennonite* (Wipf & Stock, 1976, republished in 2001). The South Central Conference (Mennonite Church) and the Western District Conference (General Conference Mennonite Church) suspended Brown's ministerial credentials for sexual misconduct in 1995. "Hubert L. Brown," *Mennonite Abuse Prevention* (blog), accessed May 8, 2025, mennoniteabuseprevention.org/case/hubert-brown/.

[70] History and mission professor David Evans and religion and culture professor Peter Dula of Eastern Mennonite University demonstrate a nondefensive posture while learning from scholars who directly criticize Christianity while examining race, history, and social change as editors of *Between the World of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Christianity* (Cascade, 2018); David Evans, *Damned Whiteness: How White Christian Allies Failed the Black Freedom Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2025).

anti-violence,[71] and scholars working on Mennonite entanglement with the Holocaust,[72] critically assess the limitations of liberal politics and traditional peace theology and demonstrate the links between internal and systematic violence. These authors forward indigenous, Black, and Global South perspectives that critique earlier peace theology's shortcomings.[73] Furthermore, reckoning involves practical formation, acknowledging that the church itself is not inherently transformative but must actively engage in its own justice work. Initiatives like Roots of Justice,[74] and seminary courses such as "Practicing and Embodying Nonviolence" and "Trail of Death: A Pilgrimage of Remembrance, Lament, and Transformation," co-instructed by a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, aim to cultivate ongoing formation and accountability within Mennonite communities, ensuring that decolonization and anti-racist strategies become Christian praxis rather than mere rhetoric.

Finally, methodologically, third wave practitioners and scholars seek dialogue across North-South, scholar-praxis, and other forms of difference to theologize and articulate peace stances. While the first

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[71] Sarah Nahar, "Liberation, Lineage, and Village: Why I Am an Anabaptist"; Regina Stoltzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer, *Been in the Struggle*; David C. Cramer, "From Nonviolence to Antiviolence: Resistance to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96, no. 1 (2022): 93.

[72] Mennonite Central Committee has provided leadership reckoning with Mennonite involvement in the Holocaust, as in "MCC and National Socialism" edition of *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly* 9 no. 4 (2021), ed. Alain Epp Weaver, 1–68. Also showing that MCC's humanitarian efforts and European Mennonites were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy is Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, 1st ed., Transnational Mennonite Studies (University of Toronto Press, 2020). See also Benjamin Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton University Press, 2017) and Lisa Schirch, "Anabaptist-Mennonite Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries," for further contributions.

[73] Oftentimes key voices emerge from violence-affected communities of struggle on the margins of European Mennonite communities. My "Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution" students from the Global South and marginalized communities in the United States find third-wave resources help them to read themselves into the story of peace theology traditions, while first-wave peace theology and second-wave Yoderian peace theology often, in the words of Indonesian peace studies student Andi Santoso, "alienate" and "other" their experiences, while failing to offer robust responses to the colonialism and neo-colonialism to which their families and communities have been subjected. See Janna Hunter-Bowman, "Commentary on Blessed Are the Peacemakers," *Syndicate Symposium: Blessed Are the Peacemakers, by Lisa Sowle Cahill* (blog), 2022, syndicate.network/symposia/theology/blessed-are-the-peacemakers/.

[74] Damascus Road (later Roots of Justice Inc.) was founded in 1995 by the Anabaptist relief, service, and peace agency Mennonite Central Committee to conduct anti-racism trainings for Mennonite and Anabaptist communities. Roots of Justice is a process of reckoning for teams working to dismantle racism within their institution or community. www.rootsofjusticetraining.org/.

wave peace theology was produced by men of European descent reliant on biblical and historical theology, and second wave authors leveraged social science and accompaniment of violence-affected people in international setting of conflict, third-wave contributors aim for experience and reflection that transcend these divides. For example, activist/minister-scholars are thinking together across distinct genealogies and chasms of knowledge and relationality. Examples include Sarah Augustine and Sheri Hostetler's dialogue of Pueblo and European Mennonite perspectives in *So We and Our Children May Live*[75] and Nekeisha A. Alexis and Jamie Pitts's *What Happened at Benham West: African American Stories of Community, Displacement, and Hope*[76] which, through collaboration with Elkhart's Black community, reshaped city planning. These instances exemplify reckoning with the violence in Mennonite histories, theologies, and stories by engaging the marginalized in new social-political and theological construction. Third wave peace theology embraces power self-reflexively, aiming to cultivate an alternative political body while maintaining realism about internal formation and the state.

The third wave affirms that God is at work in history revealing, confronting, and healing. The key post is the work of reckoning, which enables the both/and stance Harding urged and characterizes the aspirations of much third wave praxis and scholarship. The stress on listening to voices and experiences of those most affected by violence is integrated into the social change model of interrogation and reworking for rebuilding. If the first wave emphasizes love of the cross and the second transformation, the third wave plunges into Holy Saturday to open new parameters for political life together and in society. Reckoning with the excruciating disconnect between stated affirmations and lived reality, between concepts of peace and the violence they shield, can establish a new trajectory for peace witness today.

## IMPLICATIONS: SUBJECTIVITIES, PATHOLOGIES, AND METHODOLOGIES

The pluralization of voices and subject positions created by baptism and ecclesial relations in communities around the globe raises questions taken up by the third wave. Echoing concerns Hinojosa raised nearly a decade earlier, Isaac Villegas writes that his bloodline comes from "other-than-European land" before putting a fine point on the matter by puzzling over the shifts in pronouns Mark Jantzen and

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[75] Sarah Augustine and Sheri Hostetler, *So We and Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis* (Herald, 2023).

[76] Nekeisha A. Alexis and Jamie Pitts, *What Happened at Benham West: African American Stories of Community, Displacement, and Hope* (Wolfson, 2025).

John Thiesen use to call Mennonites to account for participation in the Holocaust in *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*. Are the Mennonites with blood on their hands "them" or "us"? Jantzen and Thiesen use both in quick succession. Villegas writes, "These subtle shifts in subjectivity occur throughout the book without attention to the complications of representation regarding who speaks on behalf of whom, as well as the complexities of claiming an other's moral obligation to receive such storytelling as an articulation of their own identity."[77] Attention to representation and subjectivity are crucial to think through a peace stance in theory and praxis given the long afterlives of colonial legacies, including whiteness, at work in power relations and logics.

Cross-wave thinking might help us address habits by thinking through the assumptions we carry and postures we inhabit. Earlier, I described waves emerging both as correctives of other waves and as constructive contributions. One moves into another wave not fully formed or self-standing. Habits of thought of one wave persist in the social, political, and theological struggles of another wave. The waves crash into each other. An invitation that accompanies this interpretation is to think through the posture we are inhabiting, given a dose of Niebuhr's understanding that we have the inclination to injustice but the possibility to do justice.

Mennonites today can acknowledge that Mennonites have done injustice and seek to do justice without continuing a habit (emergent from the first wave) of expecting perfection, which would mean that the capacity for justice has been the tendency. When practitioners and scholars working primarily in the second wave of transformation and third wave of reckoning are rightly horrified by new revelations of Anabaptist church institutions and histories entangled in various forms of violence, and when there is a felt need for full correction in order to stay in community or otherwise engage in shared work for justice in the world, a need that drives to excoriate and depart from the community, might this be a first wave habit of assuming the perfection of church as an historical reality "without spot or wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:27), a bride fit for the divine groom? For example, what would it even mean for "us" to fully rectify Mennonite participation in the Holocaust before urging the US government to support a ceasefire in Gaza, especially given the questions of representation above? Such responses look, in Niebuhr's terms, like a "dogmatic commitment to the theory," of first wave theology "despite the experience" at odds

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[77] Isaac Villegas, "Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* Review Essay," *Anabaptist Witness*, May 20, 2022, www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/mark-jantzen-and-john-d-thiesen-eds-european-mennonites-and-the-holocaust/.

with the theory "and subsequent reflection"[78] on it that led to various postures of disavowal and subsequent corrective waves.

Historically, this tendency has been understood as a pathology, *Täuferkrankheit*. Tom Yoder Neufeld writes that "schism became already very early in the Anabaptist movement a version of nonconformity to the world, where the 'world' was those within the community deemed to be sinful or heretical."[79] References to sickness trace back to the tumult of persecution and migration of the early seventeenth century, when Mennonites with diverse perspectives were forming different communities.[80] It was dubbed in German *Täuferkrankheit*, the Anabaptist disease. For Neufeld, it is a consequence of intolerance and struggle for power as much as a desire for faithfulness.[81] So perhaps we are unwittingly preserving a first wave dynamic that, if identified, we could self-critically evaluate.

Rather than pathologize the tendency, it would be constructive to question it. To muse: even if the "perfectionism" of withdrawn first wave Mennonites has been left behind intellectually, does the notion of the church as a change agent cosmically characterized by ethical transcendence still have a grasp on some level? Does tracing Mennonite responses to Niebuhr's sectarian pacifist church/state distinction help reveal how this might have come about? Might that be partially why discoveries of abuse, violence, and patterns of injustice are hard to accept; lead to deep feelings of betrayal; and create a profound sense of crisis and chaos? (These are things I have been told and observed repeatedly.) Might the resulting alienation be rooted in unexamined assumptions that a human community/ institution *could* exercise cosmic ethical transcendence permanently through history and is inclined to justice, in which one understands oneself as a little Christ? Might it be useful to keep in mind that the concepts of a faithful church were formed by church leaders trying to hold a diverse group together by engaging Niebuhr's backhanded compliment (Hershberger)? And then by a sexual predator (John Howard Yoder) sheltering violence in certain theological categories? Might that history be useful to contemplate amidst angst that the peace church, institution, or movement has again not lived up to its vocation?

My argument is that Mennonites more adequately speak in theological terms of peace when incorporating a dose of Niebuhr's

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[78] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Pacifism and the Use of Force," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Westminster, 1928), 248.

[79] Thomas Yoder Neufeld, "Unity of the Spirit," *The Canadian Mennonite* 22, no. 5 (2018): canadianmennonite.org/unity-spirit/.

[80] Ronald C. Jantz, *Living in the World: How Conservative Mennonites Preserved the Anabaptism of the Sixteenth Century* (Wipf and Stock, 2020), 23.

[81] Yoder Neufeld, "Unity of the Spirit"; Jantz, *Living in the World*.

theological terms of realism on the distinction between capacity and inclination. This means we can acknowledge Mennonite participation in various forms of violence and support those doing the fine-grained work of putting a stop to it and reckoning with the deep history and systemic roots, while simultaneously working to put a stop to unfolding atrocities through specific constructive interventions. This reflection also shows how people can inhabit the characteristics of different waves at different times and even simultaneously. It is not only appropriate but perhaps inevitable that people will lean into different waves at different times. This is a key reason to speak of waves as conceptual and not generations exclusively reflecting historical periods.

## In Lieu of Conclusion: Wave Four? (Self-Critical Responsibility)

Realism about the state and society (second wave) and realism about the church and history (third wave) create new opportunities for integration. Synthesizing notions of nonconformity (wave 1) with realism about the state (wave 2) and realism about the church (wave 3) through self-critical reflection positions Anabaptists to articulate a story of what it means to be Christian that speaks beyond disillusionment to liberation and confronts new forms of Christendom. A synthesis will neither romanticize Anabaptist history nor will it be despairing. Nor does the work of self-critical integration and synthesis fall into the Mennonite habit of claiming or demanding perfection. It accepts responsibility by adopting a self-critical posture in a constructive retelling of Anabaptist movements' story as our story, ever challenged by the call to discipleship issued by an executed God condemned on the charge of subversion, who defines creative response to violence born from God's ultimate refusal to conform to violence.

We live in a clashing of sea tides: major segments seek to dismantle Christianity while simultaneously a white Christian right is rising. This latter movement empowered a leader who aggressively pursues democracy's decline and violates legal and social norms that attend to society's most vulnerable, like immigrants. In these early days of the second Trump administration, many Christians disturbed by the dangerous cruelty pursued through lies seem unable or unwilling to engage socially and politically. One of the first inspiring and encouraging acts of resistance came from a pastor urging President Trump to have mercy.[82]

[82] Anna Betts, "Bishop Who Angered Trump with Call for Mercy Says She Will Not Apologize," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2025, sec. US news, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/23/mariann-edgar-budde-trump-sermon-defense.

Several weeks later, Pope Francis wrote a sweeping letter to the US bishops condemning the "major crisis" triggered by President Donald Trump's mass deportation plans and rebuffing Vice President J. D. Vance's use of Catholic theology to rationalize the administration's immigration crackdown. The same day, *Mennonite Church USA et al. v. United States Department of Homeland Security et al.* was filed in a federal district court in Washington, DC. The lawsuit represented the collective response of two dozen Christian and Jewish religious denominations and associations to the Trump administration's rescission of the Department of Homeland Security "sensitive locations" policy that had restricted Immigration and Customs Enforcement from conducting immigration raids, arrests, and other enforcement actions in houses of worship. Christian witness matters.

*Mennonite Church USA et al. v. United States Department of Homeland Security et al.* is the second major Anabaptist religious freedom case to shape federal policy. The first was *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), which held that a state law requiring children to attend school past eighth grade violates the parents' constitutional right to direct the religious upbringing of their children. Thus, under the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, Amish children were not forced to attend school past eighth grade. This supports a separatist stance of the first wave. The February 2025 lawsuit brings together elements of various waves. It implicitly claims that the church is a refuge from the violence of the state (wave 1). By collaborating with other realists regarding the state, it challenges state violence and aims to transform current Executive action, which obstructs the embodiment of the church as an ethic addressing injustices faced by the most vulnerable (wave 2). The Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) churchwoman providing leadership is Iris de León, an associate executive director working to promote anti-racism and intercultural competency in support of various People of Color organizations in MCUSA (wave 3). As spokeswoman, she placed the action in continuity with the Anabaptist story. By her account, it was taken by a corporate body of disciples of Jesus "honoring the cloud of witnesses" who struggled for religious freedoms during the Radical Reformation (wave 4).[83] The suit is a rejection of nationalism and imperial religion.

The grassroots group Mennonite Action (MA) likewise demonstrates theology's resources for movement building and a compelling call to reject imperial religion today. MA is, in its own words, "a

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[83] "MC USA and More than Two Dozen Christian and Jewish Denominations and Associations Sue to Protect Religious Freedoms," *Mennonite Church USA* (blog), accessed February 13, 2025, www.mennoniteusa.org/news/mc-usa-joins-more-than-two-dozen-christian-and-jewish-denominations-and-associations-sue-to-protect-religious-freedoms/.

movement of Mennonites taking public action for a free Palestine and the liberation of all God's children."[84] It incorporates elements of first wave (religious and political nonconformity), second wave (confidence in the transformation, realism about the state, and worship as resistance), and third wave (acknowledgement of participation in violent legacies, thus realism about the church and Global North citizenship) for movement building. MA synthesizes second wave realism of the state with third wave realism about North American church members' citizenship in society to take Niebuhr's call to become "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" to a new level by deliberately and strategically building power primarily by telling Mennonites' story. It is at its best when telling the story in view of the complexity of the past and prospectively. Retrospectively, Anabaptists do well to consider a five-hundred-year theological legacy of resisting the coupling of state and church power (or, to state the matter without anachronism, idolatrous embodiments of imperial religion). Anabaptists must also self-critically reflect on the historical vulnerability of Anabaptist communities to absorption into broader nationalisms (e.g., Mennonite involvements in National Socialism and participation in the Holocaust, above, and contemporary expressions of such vulnerability).

Refusing the public and private divide, a steering committee member states: "Our protest is worship."[85] Creatively extending such a refusal suggests that longstanding practices of prayer, contemplation, fasting, and communal discernment may be held together with collective action in the fourth wave. Furthermore, pastoral team members at public actions and on monthly mass calls speak of enacting a new reality in a community bearing witness to Jesus and the call to discipleship.[86] Participants deliberately distance themselves from positions of "nonresistance" (as separation and refusal to engage) while claiming nonconformity to political and spiritual coercion like "our early spiritual ancestors." They mobilize Mennonite symbols associated with ideal colonial whiteness, such as four-part Christian hymns and handmade quilts, for decolonial ends.[87] These acts exemplify self-critically Chrisitan engagement. Exercises of "responsibility" include distance-taking, ambivalence, disavowal, and reaffirmation of elements of a tradition. They are exercises in self-conscious formation.

[84] "Mennonite Action," www.mennoniteaction.org.

[85] Anna Johnson, Christmas letter, 2024.

[86] Fieldnotes from December 19, 2023. Over one hundred Mennonite demonstrators and friends held an unannounced worship service in the parking lot of Representative Rudy Yakym's office calling on him to stand for lasting peace and justice in Gaza.

[87] Jamie Pitts offered this framing in the context of a March 5, 2025, question-and-answer session of the January–April 2025 AMBS lunchtime colloquium Peace Theology in Movement, co-instructed by Janna Hunter-Bowman and Jonathan Smucker.

MA trainings, schools for peace, and members' new participation in Mennonite churches further point towards a leaning into the very old notion of formation to become excellent in the ways of gospel nonviolence (vs individually moving away from what sinful human nature inclined people to do in churches). At its best, MA signals how retrospective and prospective narratives, paired with new ways of being, embrace a new kind of responsibility.[88]

Realism about society and realism about the church entails reflection on power that primes synthetic thinkers for self-reflective, deliberate power-building to exercise a new form of responsibility. Niebuhr often wrote of the "responsibility" Christians have to work for justice, a responsibility in tension with a commitment to nonresistance or nonviolence. In the 1950s, the Mennonite theologian Gordon Kaufman wrote an article entitled "Nonresistance and Responsibility,"[89] in which he, agreeing with Niebuhr, argued that even if politics or war are sinful, Christians must still engage as part of their ministry of reconciliation. He is arguing for Mennonites to enter and engage the political realm, including running for high office. His understanding of "responsibility" was fairly state-centric. Mennonite Action embodies a different understanding of how "responsibility" is exercised. Reckoning with the things Anabaptists have gotten horribly wrong—such as colonialism and antisemitism—pluralizes grassroots ecumenical and interfaith partnerships that mobilize to press for change in government policies and society.[90] MA may well be a "front light," to draw on Harding's term that is the name of the MA podcast,[91] of a fourth wave of peace theology.

I hope this perspective will contribute to cross-wave discussions, a self-reflexive channeling of the energy passing through the waters creating the fourth wave, and greater awareness of the affordances of peace theologies to ecumenical and interdisciplinary conversations on religion, violence, and peace. M

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[88] On December 19, 2024, the webinar Mennonite Action Mass Meeting featured Shane Burley and Ben Lorber, *Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism* (Melville House, 2024), and Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (University of Chicago Press, 2019). The Mass Call is a public expression of MA thinking and working alongside members of Jewish communities together "Organizing Against Anti-Semitism and Christian Nationalism," the title of the call. Recording available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcsz6VfVi-g.

[89] *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and Other Mennonite Essays* (Faith and Life, 1979).

[90] Jonathan Smucker, Tim Nafziger, and Sarah Augustine, "Give Us the Courage to Enter the Song," *Anabaptist Witness* 2, no. 2 (November 20, 2024), www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/give-us-the-courage-to-enter-the-song/.

[91] "Front Light Podcast," Mennonite Action, www.mennoniteaction.org/frontlight.

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