

Lecture Notes
Dennis Gruending
Should Christians be Pacifists?

Ottawa School of Theology & Spirituality
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Introduction:

Welcome to our course, Should Christians be Pacifists?

I am Dennis Gruending and I am coordinating this class along with my good friend Anne Wieler – and in a minute I will tell you how this came to be. Tonight we will briefly introduce ourselves. We will talk about the course description, drawn mainly from the blurb that we placed in the OSTS pamphlet. We will give you a quick week-by-week description of the class and the guests who we have invited in to present. And then we will have time for some questions and comments.

Introductions

I am a writer and a blogger. I am also a former Member of Parliament – but I hope that you won't hold that against me. Prior to my time on Parliament Hill, I was a journalist and broadcaster in Saskatchewan and Ontario. I also spent four years in the 1990s as the Director of Communications for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops here in Ottawa.

My friend and fellow coordinator for this class is Anne Wieler. She is a retired nurse who spent decades working in the Canadian north. Anne has also worked for Health Canada here in Ottawa, spent some years in Geneva with the World Health Organization, and she has done health related consulting in Canada and abroad. Anne has also done much volunteer work with a variety of organizations. Anne was recognized for all of these efforts by being awarded the Order of Canada in 2007.

About a year ago, the School's curriculum committee was planning for this year's courses. The committee was discussing an offer by Pierre Laviolette to teach a class in Just War Theory. That class was, indeed, offered between September and November of 2011.

In any event, Anne asked at that curriculum committee meeting if OSTS would consider presenting a course on Christian Pacifism. They turned it back to her, saying that she should make a detailed proposal. She promptly volunteered both of us, and here we are.

Pacifism: a definition

Let's look briefly at the word pacifism. The Stanford University Dictionary of Philosophy says: "The word 'pacifism' is derived from the Latin word 'pacific, which means 'peace making'.

The dictionary goes on to say: "Pacifism in the West appears to begin with Christianity. Perhaps the most famous use of the word pacifism is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), where Jesus claims that the "peacemakers" are blessed.

Finally, the dictionary defines pacifism in the following way: "Pacifism is a commitment to peace and opposition to war." It can also be described as "a principled rejection of war and killing."

Again, quoting the Standford dictionary: "Pacifism, as it is used in ordinary discourse today, includes a variety of commitments on a continuum from an absolute commitment to nonviolence in all actions to a more focused or minimal sort of anti-warism."

It is important to note, as implied above, that for many people pacifism is more than an approach toward war. Again to quote the dictionary: "[Pacifism] can be used to describe a commitment to nonviolence in one's personal life that might include the attempt to cultivate pacific virtues such as tolerance, patience, mercy, forgiveness, and love."

The dictionary also talks about what it calls: "a family of pacifisms". So there is not just one kind of pacifism that defines all of its varieties. pacifisms lies along a spectrum – and I will talk more about this in a minute or two.

Brief course description:

Now, let's take a quick look at the description of the class as we wrote it for the school's brochure: First there is our title: Should Christians be Pacifists? Let me say at the outset – that is for you to decide. Our goal in the next weeks is to present information about a theology and a way of life that many Christians hold dear. I found in doing some research for this class and in talking to knowledgeable people that I really didn't know all that much about pacifism, and that may be true for some of you as well. So our goal is to take a closer and a respectful look at pacifism – some of its pros and cons.

Here is how we actually described the class: "This course explores the history, theology and lived examples of pacifism and non-violence. Given the tragic human, financial and environmental costs of pervasive militarism, we highlight examples of peace-seeking alternatives in our global and local communities. The course features a combined lecture-discussion format, with ample time for moderated conversations."

Please note that we have chosen to talk about Christian pacifism. One could talk about the pacifism of Gandhi or of many Buddhists, to mention just two religiously based varieties of pacifism. One could also look at the pacifism of people who come at it from a more secular and liberal point of view.

I am thinking, for example, Óscar Arias, the former president of Costa Rica and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. I would say his is a pacifism born more out of a political than of a religious conviction. In October 2011, Arias was awarded an honorary degree by Carleton University in Ottawa.

Arias used his 30-minute acceptance speech to deliver an impassioned message about the urgency of shifting out-of-control military spending into investments for peace and human development. He said that the world's nations spent \$1.6 trillion in military expenditures in 2010. Let's provide a bit of context to that figure – Canada's federal budget for 2010 was about \$280 billion. So in 2010 military spending in the world was equal to about six times the federal budget of Canada.

Arias used his speech to give a whole variety of examples of how that money could be better spent. For example, if the world reduced its military spending by 25%, we could buy 1.9 billion computers – one for every child in the developing world. Costa Rica, by the way, decided to abolish its army in 1949 after a civil war – although the country does have a police force.

It is good to oppose militarism, and I think opposition to militarism can be a legitimate reason in its own right to be a pacifist, especially in an age of nuclear weapons. But many people are pacifists mainly for religious reasons – because they believe that is what Jesus Christ is calling them to be. I have just read in a book called *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* in which the authors say that the word peace occurs 235 times in the New Testament. In one of our sessions in this course, we will look at pacifism in the Bible and the early church.

We say also in the class description that we will explore “the history, theology and lived examples of pacifism and non-violence.” Theology and history: In his class before Christmas on the Just War, Pierre Lavolette said that he believed the early Christian church was Pacifist. Pierre told us that Christians were persecuted in the early years of the church, partly because they refused to serve in the Roman army. But in 313 AD (Edict of Milan), Emperor Constantine decreed that Christianity would be tolerated and later, on his deathbed, he converted to Christianity. By 480 AD you had to be a Christian to serve in the Roman army. That's the politics of it.

But as Pierre told us, Bishop Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo (particularly the latter) developed a theological position called the Just War Theory. Many people misunderstand this theory and believe that it was meant to give the church's blessing to war. Actually, that is not the case. The Just War Theory and its theology attempt to define and limit the circumstances under which wars are permissible, and also to limit the kinds of behaviour that are unacceptable in wartime – you should not go around killing civilians, to take but one example. Unfortunately, as Pierre was to tell us, warriors usually don't listen much to theologians, so the Just War Theory probably has been honoured in the breach far more often than in the observance.

There is also the problem that people most often think that their war effort is just but the other guy's is not. During World War I, a Roman Catholic cardinal in France published a pamphlet insisting that France's war was just but Germany's was not. Within a few months, Catholics in Germany answered with a pamphlet of their own saying that it was their war that was just – and a German Catholic cardinal wrote the introduction to this piece.

So in practice, there is a big problem with the Just War Theory. And to be clear, the major difference between pacifism and the Just War tradition is that pacifism rejects war as an acceptable means for obtaining peace.

But as the religious scholar John Howard Yoder has pointed out, the Just War position is a lot closer to pacifism than are several other approaches to war. Those approaches include national self-interest, where political leaders think their nation's needs, real or perceived, are all the justification they need to wage war. Yoder also talks about holy war, where one group thinks itself divinely ordained to destroy God's enemies – as they define them. Yoder also talks about the Rambo effect – where war and killing are considered essential to how certain men achieve their manhood. How often do we see that in news, in documentaries and especially in movies.

So there are a variety of approaches to war, just as there are a variety of approaches to pacifism. In fact, Yoder makes much the same point as the Stanford dictionary about their being multiple pacifisms. To quote Yoder again: "There is need for far greater awareness that pacifism is not just one specific position, spoken for authoritatively by just one thinker. Instead, it is a wide gamut of views that vary and are sometimes even contradictory."

Yoder has a book called *Nevertheless* that is filled with examples of this. Let's look at just a few of them. There is, for example, the pacifism of "absolute principle", where people believe simply that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" admits of no exceptions and has to be taken as an absolute. Yoder says this position admits that there is a limit to the ability of human beings to calculate right and wrong on their own, and

that it admits there will be points where “the will of God will simply have to be taken on revelation.” Yoder says this way of thinking is not a popular one in current thought among educated elites in Western countries – but he says it remains a “respectable minority position”.

Then there is the pacifism of what Yoder calls the “virtuous minority” – a group of people who believe that they have been called by God to live peacefully. This would fall within the realm of absolute pacifism. These people live lives of non-resistance – which means that they will not get involved in violent conflict themselves, but they do not necessarily say that the state cannot do so – as long as these Christians are not part of the violence. Some Mennonites, but certainly not all, fit this category.

It is from the ranks of these groups that some of the conscientious objectors were drawn during the two World Wars in particular. But it is worth mentioning that others, who are not Christians, have been conscientious objectors as well. I am thinking of those who refused to serve in the Vietnam War, for example, or of the Americans who did not want to fight in the more recent war in Iraq.

A third kind of pacifism is what Yoder calls the “pacifism of programmatic political alternatives”. In contrast to the “absolute pacifism” that we talked about a moment ago, this type of pacifism is more of a “contingent pacifism”. It is focused more upon concrete plans and goals than it is upon absolute religious conviction.

It may, for example, be based upon positions being advocated to governments or bodies like the United Nations –I think here of the work of former Senator Douglas Roche, along with Ernie Regehr and Murray Thomson, the co-founders of Project Ploughshares. These three men are all recipients of the Order of Canada, and they have convinced over 500 other Order of Canada recipients to sign a petition calling on the government of Canada to take a leadership role in pushing for a ban on all nuclear weapons.

The arguments used here are not posed in religious language. The arguments are ethical but secular and they are meant to have a broadly-based appeal. But in this case it is interesting to note that Douglas Roche is a prominent Catholic; Ernie Regehr is a Mennonite and Murray Thomson is a Quaker. In fact, Quakers are well known for studying issues deeply and then putting forward practical alternatives to prevent war and conflict. So as you see it can get complex.

You will notice also that in our class description we talk about “the tragic human, financial and environmental costs of pervasive militarism” – and we contrast that to “examples of peace-seeking alternatives in our global and local communities.”

We will talk in at least one class about militarism and its costs and in other classes about what we call lived examples of “peace-seeking alternatives.” In fact, at least four of our eight guest lecturers will talk about how they and their organizations offer what we are calling a “peace witness”.

One of our presenters, Eric Schiller, has had experience with the Christian Peacemaker Teams, known by the initials CPT. The organization describes its mission in the following way: “What would happen if Christians devoted the same discipline and sacrifice to non-violent peacemaking that armies devote to war? Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) seeks to enlist the whole church in organized, nonviolent alternatives to war and places teams of trained peacemakers in regions of lethal conflict.”

These regions vary from the occupied Palestinian territories to Colombia to Aboriginal reserves in Canada. You may recall the case of James Loney, the Canadian member of CPT who was kidnapped and held in Iraq – thankfully he survived. The CPT folks are certainly not passive pacifists.

Finally, in looking at the class description, you will notice that we say the following: “The course features a combined lecture-discussion format, with ample time for moderated conversations.” This leads me to some of the nuts and bolts of how we will proceed. We have 10 classes together. This first one and the last one are shortened because we have a liturgical service on each of those evenings. In this first class, we introduce the topic and how we will proceed. In the last class, we will summarize what we have heard and talked about.

For the eight classes in between, we have invited some excellent guest presenters. We have asked each of our guests to speak for 20-25 minutes and that should leave another 20 minutes or so for discussion. We have deliberately structured the class in such a way that there will be lots of time for discussion and comments. Since you know you will have time to ask your questions, we would ask that you hold your questions or comments until after the guests have presented. If you have a brief question for clarification while they are speaking, that is a different matter. Ask it. But we suggest that as a sign of courtesy that you hear our guests out before making general comments or asking questions.

Course Outline: Week by-Week

Now let’s take a quick look at the week-by-week course outline and calendar:

Jan. 09: Liturgical service & course introduction

Tonight we had a liturgical service and we are introducing the course content.

Jan. 16: The Pacifist debate

Nick Barrowman will walk us through some of the key intellectual arguments about pacifism, pro and con. You have likely heard some of them. “Pacifism is fine in principle but what about Hitler.” Or: “what would happen if everyone was a pacifist”? Or: “You mean you wouldn’t shoot or stab a guy if he was raping your daughter.” Nick has a website called <http://justpacifism.com/> where he lays out his thoughts about pacifism and about some of these questions.

Jan. 23: Pacifism in the Bible & early church

This lecture will be presented by Rev. Don Friesen, pastor at Ottawa Mennonite Church.

Jan. 30: Anabaptism then & now

This will be an historical and theological presentation about Anabaptism to be presented by Paul Heidbrecht. Paul is the director of the Mennonite Central committee’s Ottawa office. Paul also has a Ph. D. in Religious Studies from Marquette University in Wisconsin.

Feb. 06: Militarism and its costs

Debbie Grisdale will present this class. She has worked with Physicians for Nuclear Responsibility and is on the board of Project Ploughshares. I believe Debbie is an Anglican.

Feb. 13: Peace witness -- a Quaker’s life

Eric Schiller will present this class. He is a retired professor of engineering at the University of Ottawa and he has been involved in many peacekeeping initiatives, including service with the Christian Peacemaker Teams in the occupied Palestinian territories. Eric is a Quaker.

Feb. 20: Peace witness -- Mennonite Central Committee

Jennifer Wiebe is a policy analyst with the Ottawa office of the Mennonite Central Committee and will talk to us about how their office attempts to provide a peace witness in Ottawa, particularly on Parliament Hill. She has BA and MA degrees in English literature and a postgraduate diploma in Peace and Conflict Studies from Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo. Jennifer is also on the board of Project Ploughshares.

Feb. 27: Peace witness – conscientious objectors

William Janzen will present in this class. He is the retired director of the Ottawa office of the Mennonite Central Committee. Bill has an MA in religious studies from the University of Ottawa, an MA in International Affairs from Carleton University and a PhD in political science from Carleton University. He is the author of a book called *Limits to Liberty*, which (among many other things) looks at conscientious objectors in the First and Second World Wars.

March 05: Peace witness – parenting for peace

Carmen Brubacher is an Ottawa mother of four. We got to know her many years ago when she was a young and dynamic counsellor at church camp attended by our daughters.

March 12: Liturgical service & Summing up

We will have a discussion about the ideas that have arisen in the previous nine weeks and other topics that we did not really get to discuss. There will be a worship service in the church sanctuary on March 12th to end the class.

I will assemble a brief bibliography for our class as we go along, and I invite you to add to that list from what you read and see and hear. By our last class we will have a more comprehensive reading list, which I will hand out to you.

Use of Pulpit & Politics Blogsite:

I mentioned that I write a blog called Pulpit and Politics. I hope to post pieces on some of the topics and presentations that are made during the class. The address of my website, which contains my blog, is listed on the handout that I have provided. It is easy to remember: www.dennisgruending.ca/

Thank you.