

## Using Nonviolence against Violence?

### Conflict Intervention as a Challenge for Peace Theology

European Symposium, Bienenberg, 29-30 June 2015

## Voices from a Peace-Church Perspective

- A Working Document -

Challenged by the many violent situations we witness in different parts of the world, Mennonite Theological Schools in Europe<sup>1</sup> invited representatives, specialists and students from various Mennonite backgrounds and European locations to discern together anew, what the calling and the possible voice of the peace church in the midst of these troubled and disturbing times might be. In addition, ecumenical guests were welcomed to contribute, including representatives of the “Becoming a Church of Just Peace” process within the Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden, the World Council of Churches (Commission on International Affairs), and the European network of Church & Peace.

Globally today, we face the rise of the so-called “Islamic State”, the devastating situation in Syria and Iraq, violent acts by groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria, a possible genocide in Burma/Myanmar, a new civil war in Burundi and the ongoing one in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the violent conflict nearby in Eastern Ukraine, as well as the terrible plight and even death of countless refugees on their way to European countries. International political institutions and national governments in Europe do not seem to be able to identify and take the necessary steps towards a situation of just peace for all, nor to provide protection for those who are most vulnerable.

During the past months Mennonites have been invited by other churches and the secular media to share their view on the current situations – from a distinct peace church perspective. The gathered participants have reacted to such invitations in different ways. We feel the need to test anew and clarify among ourselves what and how we can contribute to this conversation, in addition to the many practical activities in which we are already engaged. Is there a specific wisdom and perspective that we share?

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## I. Framework of Discussion

In order to answer this question, we started our discussion within the framework of the (highly debated and – as in the case of Libya – already misused by politicians of our home countries) concept of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). We realize that as a peace church, coming from a general position of *active non-violence*, our churches are involved in the dimension of “responsibility to prevent” conflicts as well as the “responsibility to rebuild” and reconcile after conflicts. And yet, the dimension of a “responsibility to intervene” in violent conflict remains a crucial challenge to us – as to everybody else: In situations of harsh violence against those who cannot defend their lives themselves, can we maintain our general position of non-violence, and if so, how should it be articulated?

When we speak of responsibility, we differentiate between the following:

- (a) responsibility *for* the neighbour – and the aggressor (“enemy”), and
- (b) responsibility/accountability *to* an authority – confessing that God as made known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – will always remain our highest authority.

We have revisited different positions held on these themes by Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, by Mennonites from the 17<sup>th</sup> through to the 19<sup>th</sup> C, and – after being affected by two world wars – in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> C. Mennonites have continued to discuss the challenges posed and – depending on time and context – developed a variety of positions.

Discussions among Mennonites and Catholics in previous years have proposed a concept of “just policing” in order to meet the challenge of a “responsibility to intervene”. This conference has welcomed this concept in its discussions in order to test whether and how this could contribute to our search for diminishing the use of military means and creating spaces for peace and justice. The question we raise: **“From a Christian ethics perspective, can we legitimise a form of police coercion that is solely restricted to defence and to the reduction of violence and to protect those who are directly threatened in life and limb and who call for such protection?”**

## II. Three Positions Discussed

Within this context, we discussed three different positions held by members of the Mennonite churches in Europe. Because of time limitations we were not able to pursue a consensus. Our discussions are nonetheless summarized below with the intent of encouraging further dialogue.

### a. Police coercion with limited and exceptional use of lethal force

*Affirmations:*

Many affirm that police in the European societies in which we live play a necessary (though imperfect) role in maintaining order recognising that our societies contain clear legal restraints upon the use of force (for example, in cases of severe attack shooting at parts of the body that do not necessarily kill the aggressor).

*Challenges:*

We struggle to affirm – even in theory – a possible international application of this form of policing into a foreign context. The main reason is that this approach involves a “logic of violence” which tends to develop its own dynamics and in the end may lead to an escalation of violence. In addition, high reservations arise here because there does not seem to be enough information (yet) with regards to how such a police force would function in practice. (For example, would it have to

stand against forces commanded by the national government of the troubled country?) Further, there are no guarantees that such an intervention would be successful.

The question remains whether this could be a 'realistic' first step within political debate and decision making to diminish military interventions.

### **b. Police coercion without lethal force**

*Affirmations:*

At its best, such a police force could create a context in which transformation of society becomes possible, making space for other civil means that support the pacification and de-escalation of conflict. It is understood that the effectiveness of such an intervention depends on the acceptance of these police forces by the local conflicting parties.

*Challenges:*

Does such a force open the door to the use of violence? Is this the beginning of a slippery slope toward violence? What kind of "weapons" would be acceptable? Given the high potential for abuse by such forces, an effective means of control would need to be implemented. Could such control-mechanisms be executed by international organizations, which function independently from national governments? Who defines "just" in "just policing"? How realistic is it to assume a possible intervention of such a force in a "hot conflict"? And again, there are no guarantees that such an intervention would be successful.

### **c. Non-violent intervention**

*Affirmations:*

The non-violent position is ethically and theologically coherent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is rooted in a spiritual power and an expression of the ministry of reconciliation of the church. Practically, we have observed that international bodies acting under the ethic of non-violence generate enduring positive effects, as their approach tends to create respect and trust.

*Challenges:*

Have we explored adequately enough the diversity of non-violent options for the intervention stage? Do we have concrete proposals to make that can be discussed at the political level? We admit that so far we do not have all the means for intervening effectively in a "hot conflict" such as to ensure the protection of vulnerable peoples from crimes against humanity and genocide. This is due in part to the fact that comparatively few financial resources and training have been provided to adequately explore this approach. Much more time and space is needed to develop methods of non-violent intervention and strategy.

Many suspect or believe that non-violence will always be limited in the dimension of intervention (as understood within the concept of R2P). We witness a lack of faith in the power of non-violence even in our own communities. There is a realistic fear of the manifold risks and dangers of a strictly non-violent approach.

As above, there are no guarantees that such an intervention would be 'successful', and it implies the willingness to pay the price with one's own life – as in the other options. In addition, we wonder whether and when the non-violence position is in danger of being reduced to a kind of legalism or ideology, no longer able to give priority to the real needs of one's neighbour and the 'enemy'?

### III. Our discussions generated additional distinct and general perspectives that demand further consideration in these complex deliberations

- What really is the theological-ethical basis for intervention?
- Do the Peace Churches share a “two-kingdom” theology/ethic and if so, how is that laid out?
- Who are the “actors” in intervention? Is responsibility divided or perhaps shared? (Nation States, Governments, the UN, the «international community», the church(es), NGOs, etc.?) Are there different roles for the different actors?
- To whom is the Peace Church speaking? Our own community? Other churches? Media? Our governments? The UN?
- The “insiders” in any context of conflict need to be consulted on the next steps. We recognize the need to consult with survivors of genocide on the question of intervention.
- What can the perspectives of others (e.g. police officers who worked in Afghanistan; victims who experienced police violence etc.) contribute?
- What are the gender aspects in this discussion? Are men more tempted than women to be influenced by the myth of redemptive violence in the intervention dimension of R2P (the “hero” who rescues lives by fighting)?
- At what point is it necessary to go from prevention to intervention? Should prevention ever stop? Are “prevention” and “reconstruction” not also a sort of “intervention”?
- We fear that focusing on intervention will diminish an investment in prevention. R2P is not per se a counter-position to a position of non-violence, but if violence is still considered legitimate within this concept, the R2P concept and arguments become similar to the “just war” theory, including the risk to be misused. The UN-concept of „humanitarian intervention” failed – what we learned from that should inspire our discussion about R2P.
- If R2P is a really different approach of the “just war” theory, it should presume reducing arms and the militarization of societies (including ours), both of which fuel violent conflicts in many parts of the world, which then lead to the need for “intervention”.

### IV. What really is our responsibility – from a Peace Church perspective?

Some further “responsibilities” we share:

- Responsibility to Imagine
  - We have a responsibility to open our imaginations to alternatives to violence, to explore and articulate new forms of non-violent options for intervention.
    - Lethal violence/intervention closes the door (collapses the space) to invest in, imagine, and explore alternatives to violence (e.g. nonviolent «empowerment»)
    - There is a need to develop a counter-narrative to the preference for violent interventions.
    - Allowing for lethal force could result in a loss of credibility for the Peace Churches («Glaubwürdigkeit»).
    - Those holding political, economic and military power are already biased and tend to pursue their own interests. This compromises their ability to intervene well, especially when coercive force is used.
- Responsibility to Lament
  - Both violence & non-violence can/will result in experiences of failure and may not be able to prevent killing.

- To suffer with the suffering may be interpreted as a means of non-violent intervention.
- Jesus left his disciples without the security of violence, nor did he use this security himself. The way of saving the world is the “way of the cross”.
- Responsibility to Confess (guilt & belief)
  - We confess that we are implicated in many conflicts that seem far away.
  - We confess “Jesus is our peace”. Our way of „intervention“ wants to build on the example in Jesus.
- Responsibility to Trust
  - We are encouraged to trust in God’s presence, the Creator, and not in the ‘security’ provided by ‘created’ powers.
  - We believe that God works with us, through us, despite us toward long term peace often in ways we cannot see.
  - To intervene demands that we see others through a lens of love and compassion, in a manner that trust can be built (e.g. by restorative justice approaches).
- Responsibility to Humility
  - We must attend to our own inner tendency toward violence if we wish to encourage peace among others.
  - The belief in “the redemptive power of violence” assumes we can control the outcome, which counters humility.

#### Responsibility to Act

The Christian community is called to make concrete the way of just peace, as made manifest by Jesus. As Peace Churches, we are being asked to imagine what this way of just peace might look like in high conflict situations, and to take the necessary risks to follow this way, being willing to suffer the consequences of this way of just peace.

Our discussions will continue, among ourselves, with Christians from other traditions and believers of other faith traditions, and in the public sphere.

We depart from this symposium with the prayer: **“Guide our feet into the path of peace”** (Luke 1:79)