

Military Ministry Workshop 3

Handout 3: Pacifism

This handout is from the UUA Tapestry of Faith program [Resistance and Transformation](#): Unitarian Universalist Social Justice History, [Workshop 5](#).

The exact meaning of the term "pacifism" can be difficult to pin down. It is used to refer to perspectives ranging from absolute rejection of violence of any kind to a principled refusal to engage in military activity and a belief that conflict among nations should never be resolved through war. Although pacifism is often tied to antiwar movements and its adherents may utilize nonviolent methods of resistance, pacifism as a theory implies a dedication to a way of life or a world view that sees the application of force as the root of the problems in society and never the solution.

Pacifism, in this workshop, is defined as a political and/or religious stance that rejects all forms of violence against persons.

Christianity has been an important influence in the development of theories of pacifism. Articulations of pacifism rooted in Christian tradition can be traced back to the first centuries of the early church, to theologians, including Origen, who argued that much of the violence in the Bible was allegorical in nature. Grounded in a belief that the Christian struggle is spiritual, not physical, and a view of Christ as a model for nonviolent action, Christian pacifism is an integral part of the Quaker, Moravian, Mennonite, Amish and other faiths.

Modern pacifist theory in the United States dates back to the abolitionist movement, and Unitarians and Universalists played no small part in its development. In 1814, Unitarian minister Noah Worcester wrote a well-circulated pamphlet entitled "A Solemn Review of the Custom of War," the first significant work of American pacifism. Universalist Adin Ballou converted to Christian pacifism in 1838 and founded the pacifist Hopedale Community in 1840. Henry David Thoreau was strongly opposed to the 1848 Mexican- American War and advocated nonviolent civil disobedience. Many Unitarian abolitionists joined the journalist and reformer William Lloyd Garrison in founding the New England Non-Resistance Society, which states in its founding document:

We register our testimony, not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but all preparations for war; against every naval ship, every arsenal, every fortification; against the militia system and a standing army; against all military chieftains and soldiers; against all monuments commemorative of victory

over a fallen foe, all trophies won in battle, all celebrations in honor of military or naval exploits; against all appropriations for the defense of a nation by force and arms, on the part of any legislative body; against every edict of government requiring of its subjects military service.

These early pacifists influenced generations of social justice reformers, including Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. Pacifism is not necessarily rooted in a religious orientation, and pacifism in various forms can be found among socialist movements throughout history and among some anarchist groups of the early 20th century. Pacifism as theory and practice enjoyed a resurgence after World War I, as reports from the battlefields inspired many to reject the ultimate utility of war.

Expressions of pacifism often generate utopian or secessionist movements, such as Adin Ballou's community of Hopedale, when adherents find they cannot continue supporting a government that supports violence. John Howard Yoder, a 20th-century theologian from the Mennonite tradition, argued that the church's responsibility is not to transform the sociopolitical order through direct engagement, but rather to establish its own community, one that is "*in* the world, but not of it." One ongoing tension within pacifism is that between personal conviction and governmental authority. Today, many people continue to align themselves with this rich and evolving tradition.