

THEOLOGIES OF PEACEBUILDING AND
NONVIOLENCE – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: State of the Conversation
 Conveners: Eli McCarthy, Georgetown University
 Moderator: Leo Guardado, Fordham University
 Presenters: Leo Lushumbo, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University
 Heather DuBois, Boston College
 Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College

The session began with Leo Lushumbo, whose paper, “Environmental Justice, Peacebuilding, and Nonviolence,” centered the struggle against mining within the horizon of peacebuilding and nonviolence, reminding participants that mining was at the heart of the colonial project of the sixteenth century that continues today. Focusing on the Democratic Republic of Congo, she explained how the mineral extraction of tantalum, tin, and tungsten (“the 3 T’s”), all of which are used in consumer electronics, fuels conflict and forced displacement in the region. To end many of the conflicts taking place around the world, issues of natural resources and mining must be addressed as a fundamental part of what drives conflict in modernity.

Building off of Pope Francis’ teaching, Lushumbo highlighted some ways of moving forward, which included simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness (*Laudato Si’*, 230), maintaining harmony with creation through active nonviolence, the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, and ecological just peace. She lifted up integral ecology as a frame for understanding positive peace and providing norms for active nonviolence. She explained how active nonviolence for Pope Francis shows that unity is greater than (destructive) conflict, and that active nonviolence is about engaging rather than avoiding conflict.

But, she asked, can mining be performed in a just and sustainable way? Rather than providing a direct answer that foreclosed discussion, she guided participants through the experience of various communities across the globe who have responded to the structural and cultural violence embedded in mining practices to point to possible ways of constructively engaging mining and its supporters. Examples included communities in Peru, El Salvador, and the Philippines and the ways that universities, parishes, and base ecclesial communities have actively and nonviolently intervened to strengthen the local community’s right to self-determination about mining. Lushumbo ended by advocating for a greater social imaginary around peace that centers indigenous peacebuilding practices, values, and images.

Heather DuBois began her paper, “An Appreciative Inquiry,” by explaining both her academic background in peace and conflict studies as well as her experience working in the nonprofit peacebuilding sector. Her framing question or “appreciative inquiry” was: “Ask—not yet—what more do we need, but—first—what do we have now?” The aim of this question was to invite those in the session—in a participatory manner—to communally discern what theology already has within its own discipline that resonates with and contributes to the many tasks of peacebuilding.

In light of the focus of this first year, DuBois provided an explanation of some of Johan Galtung’s contributions to our understanding of violence and peace, particularly the differences between (1) personal and structural violence, (2) negative and positive peace, and (3) cultural and symbolic violence. She then helped participants see how

various kinds of theologies already attempt to respond to realities located within these three categories of violence and peace.

Dubois then examined the current state of key concepts in peace and conflict studies, with a particular focus on peacebuilding as a newer and more capacious term that exceeds more limited interventions like peacemaking and peacekeeping. This clarification of concepts and terms allowed for a discussion of where various theologies converge with peacebuilding, with examples of creative convergences happening in theological works that engage ethnography, community organizing, social psychology, spirituality, etc. In the conclusion, DuBois highlighted the possibility that simply shifting to the language of peacebuilding in theology can give rise to division, but that we are more than our divisions, and that there is much substantial transformation already taking place that begins by first naming violence and then developing new methods and interdisciplinary networks that enable nonviolence and build peace.

In her paper, “Can the Theology of Nonviolent Peacebuilding Co-Exist with the Permission of Just Defense,” Lisa Sowle Cahill spoke about how Pax Christi International was founded both to offer nonviolent witness and peacebuilding. She specifically noted an important relationship of how nonviolent resistance helps to shift power, so that negotiations with adversaries (a core peacebuilding practice) are more likely to be fruitful. She also explained how the logic of just war is not conducive to sustainable peace. She mentioned the inherent escalatory dynamic of just war logic, such as leaning into the notion of “victory,” and dispositions cultivated to sustain dominance. She argued that the war in Ukraine provides an example of this.

Cahill discussed Pope Francis’ contributions in his 2017 World Day of Peace message, which focuses on nonviolence as a style of politics for peace. She argued that he goes beyond an understanding of nonviolent resistance as the shifting of power, to focus on nonviolence as a vital contribution to a just and lasting peace. She also pointed out how nonviolent resistance addresses the key pillars of support or institutions that prop up or enable unjust regimes or policies. She emphasized that Pope Francis invites us to focus on the means of nonviolence. Furthermore, she suggested that one way to understand Pope Francis’ acknowledgement of a right to self-defense is that in principle one may consider violent defense justified; however, in practice there is no just war (defensive or aggressive).

This first session of the three-year interest group included about forty participants and led to a rich discussion, both with short pair shares after each speaker, and a larger group discussion. Topics included how peacebuilding can assist nonviolent resistance by building internal cohesion, engage negotiations with power holders, and sustain government transitions. Inversely, nonviolent resistance can assist peacebuilding by shifting power and raising urgency. The value of the language of active nonviolence in relation to and distinct from justice was also highlighted.

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