

# AMERICAN PACIFISM: THE PROBLEMS AND THE PROMISE

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Our age, with its many disquietudes, has been peculiarly open to radical critiques in ethics and politics. Peter Brock's account of pacifism, therefore, appears at a time when interest in the subject should be greater than in certain previous periods. We have not had comprehensive studies of the American peace movement since those of Devere Allen and Merle Curti. Brock's very detailed work does not, of course, purport to be an examination of the peace movement as a whole but only of the pacifist stream within it — that tendency which in principle rejects all war, whatever the professed goals, and stresses the notion of non-violence. Although he treats the theme only down to 1914, some of the seminal issues of pacifist thought and practice in any age — including our own — are illustrated in this massive volume. The extensive bibliography could be a point of departure for many specialized studies.

Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the First World War*. Princeton University Press. 1005 pp. \$18.50.

Essentially, early American pacifism was religious. It took two basic forms: that of the Friends or Quakers, who sought to infuse the whole world — including politics — with the pacifist ethic; and the Mennonite-Amish view which, inheriting from early sixteenth-century religious pessimism a serious doubt about whether the world of "power" could be redeemed, inculcated an ethic of withdrawal and minimal participation in affairs of the world. Later, in the eighteenth century, the Shakers added their own dimension and in the meantime the Church of the

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Brethren and other groups contributed important elements.

We are accustomed to thinking of Quakers as associated only with Pennsylvania, and one of Brock's contributions to the early history of American pacifism is to remind us that they were influential in many colonies: in Rhode Island, for example, where they were dominant in politics for a number of years; in North Carolina, where they were also active in public affairs; and in colonies like Virginia. Brock discusses the compromises which Rhode Island Quaker politicians felt compelled to accept and believes, with justification, that they impaired their pacifist convictions more than Pennsylvania leaders did. In their personal testimony, Quakers seem to have been very faithful to pacifism. Brock cites King Philip's War (1675-1676) as a testing time for New England Friends — they steadfastly refused to arm themselves, even when living in the path of the "savages" who were attacking settlements, and not a Quaker was killed or even harmed.

But non-Quakers could not understand religious sectarians who refused to participate in military defense. Thus during the War of the Spanish Succession, Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood vented his feelings about them in a 1711 letter to Lord Dartmouth:

I have been mightily embarrassed by a set of Quakers who broach doctrines so monstrous as their brethren in England never owned, nor, indeed, can be suffered by any government. They have not only refused to work themselves, or suffer any of their servants to be employed in the fortifications, but . . . say that being obliged by their religion to feed the enemies, if the French should come hither and want provisions, they must in conscience supply them.

The basis of Quaker pacifism was an Inner Light which said that war was intrinsically wrong. War was not to be spurned because it did not "work," in other words; instead, Quakers seemed to hold that it did not "work" because it was wrong.

Brock provides a good account of the Quaker experiment in Pennsylvania, stressing, of course, the difficulties in which Quaker politicians found them-

selves after the majority of the population had ceased to be members of the Society of Friends. Like the earlier work of Isaac Sharpless dealing with Quakerism and Pennsylvania politics, the present study does not try to veil the dilemmas of Quaker leaders after the early part of the eighteenth century and until they deliberately withdrew from the Legislature on the eve of the French and Indian War. Confronted by demands from the crown for war appropriations, they often temporized or took refuge in vague formulas. Then, too, there were curious seeming contradictions in early Quaker attitudes to the taking of human life. Thus many accepted capital punishment, while at the same time utterly rejecting war. The testimony against all capital punishment developed only slowly.

The other side of the picture, of course, is the magnificent effort of colonial Quakers to treat Indians with complete justice — an integral part of their pacifism; for they well understood that without very serious efforts to be equitable, the seeds of war would undoubtedly be planted. Despite — Quakers might say “because” of — Pennsylvania’s disarmament for more than two generations, there was never an Indian war, even during years when the other colonies were involved in bloodshed. Whatever their failures, Quaker leaders could point to this as one of the fruits of pacifist politics.

Colonial Quakers, too, attempted to make a clear distinction between genuine police activity and the work of soldiers. This differentiation is surely needed in our day, when many still talk rather glibly about war as “policing.”

During the Revolutionary War, Friends were confronted by a number of problems. Since they took seriously their affirmations of allegiance to the King, the majority of them could not sanction the rebellion, even though they might sympathize heartily with certain of its libertarian overtones. In addition, of course, when dissent began to take the form of military violence, Quakers courageously opposed it. Not a few fled to Canada; and many who remained were subjected to seizure of property. In general, the overwhelming majority of Friends remained loyal to the peace testimony.

Meanwhile, “withdrawal” pacifists had multiplied. Generally speaking, they were rural dwellers suspicious of the complications of commercial and town life. They saw the dilemmas which would confront genuine pacifists if they became too involved in an interdependent world: those who were committed to peace must remain aloof from politics (although many

voted for Quakers during their control of Pennsylvania), passively obeying the State in all instances except when asked to participate in war. The Mennonite-Amish tradition was little troubled by the tax problem, citing the “tribute to Caesar” statement of the New Testament.

The period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War was characterized by the rise of a non-denominational peace and pacifist movement. Enlightenment thought was not without its effect on this development and utilitarian ethics and philosophy also had some impact. Sometimes non-pacifist peace advocates worked in the same organization with pacifists. At other points, the pacifists withdrew to form their own organizations. Within the American Peace Society, founded in 1828, there was a tension from the very beginning, although non-pacifists were never in the minority. William Ladd, who sympathized with the pacifist view, sought nevertheless to be a reconciling force between the pacifists and non-pacifists. In the New England Non-Resistance Society, established in 1838, the predominant view was pacifism combined with anarchism. The League of Universal Brotherhood, which was organized in 1846, was the first international peace society and was intimately associated with the views of the great American pacifist Elihu Burritt.

Throughout all this development, one is impressed by the fact that the politics of the peace and pacifist movement could be extraordinarily complicated. The complications were exacerbated by the close association of pacifism with abolitionism. Thus William Lloyd Garrison was both an ardent abolitionist and a non-resistant anarchist pacifist. In the beginning, apparently, many abolitionists did not see a possible conflict between their abolitionist and their pacifist convictions. Insofar as they were anarchists or near-anarchists, they held that their “non-government” philosophy would undermine the institutions which were responsible for both slavery and war. As the “irrepressible conflict” approached, however, many began to ask the question which has confronted pacifists in every generation: suppose a specific objective (e.g., abolition of slavery) can to all appearances be accomplished only by war, what should our attitude be? When the Civil War came, very few in the “non-denominational” pacifist movement retained their pacifist convictions unimpaired. Among this minority was Elihu Burritt, who, with prophetic insight, insisted that war could not really emancipate the slaves, whatever the formal result (for example, an Emancipation Proclamation) might be.

Meanwhile, religious pacifism was having its own vicissitudes. Quakers continued to resist mustering for the militia and to refuse to pay taxes specifically dedicated to war. A new issue appeared, too: suppose war veterans became Quakers, could they legitimately accept the pensions to which they were legally entitled? Some answered "yes" while others gave a negative reply, not infrequently in the face of poverty. Since Quakers were for the most part no longer active in politics, the casuistry of pacifism emphasized for them such problems as the difficulty of reconciling commercial life, which might involve trade in materials for war, with their pacifist convictions. Then, too, pacifist settlers in the new regions of the West continued to raise the questions as to whether it was legitimate to carry arms: most of them answered in the negative.

During the Civil War, all the pacifist sects remained largely loyal to their convictions. Most Quakers, Mennonites, Amishmen, Shakers, and Brethren refused to enter the army, even when conscripted by North or South. Some fled into the wilderness. Quakers generally declined to "buy" substitutes or to pay the \$300 (in the North) or \$500 (in the South) required to secure exemption. Other peace sects, however, were in general willing to pay the fine. Apparently Lincoln was very sympathetic to pacifist viewpoints and did what he could within the law to alleviate the lot of conscientious objectors — a fact recognized by many Quaker Meetings after his assassination.

The Civil War was a death-blow, however, to much of the non-denominational pacifist movement. The great crusade against slavery, ultimately erupting in war, had taken its toll of psychological and ethical energy. Men argued, as many are doing today, that while war in general cannot be condoned, some wars may be essential to eliminate a particular evil. But after the Civil War another non-denominational pacifist organization did emerge — the Universal Peace Union, founded in 1866, and intimately associated with the name of Alfred Love and other disillusioned Civil War veterans. The Union attempted to carry on the pre-Civil War "secular" pacifist tradition and aroused not a little support in many circles. When the Spanish American War came, however, it felt the wrath of a public opinion which apparently could not understand how a peace organization could refuse to support *every* particular war. Because of pressure, the Union was forced out of its Philadelphia headquarters. Its momentum was lost and it gradually declined.

After the turn of the twentieth century, Brock main-

tains, American pacifism began to be affected by a number of new currents. On the religious side, many pacifist sectarians emerged from their period of quietism — a process which was to be accentuated by World War I. International socialism, too, influenced pacifist thought; for while many in the nineteenth century had been quite aware of the economic roots of much war, this consciousness now became more dramatic and widespread. In addition, the teachings of Leo Tolstoy had an important impact on men and women who were to lead American opinion — on the younger Clarence Darrow, for example, and on Jane Addams.

Brock brings his long account to an end in 1914, just before the first world war would shake up American pacifism in many ways. The volume is a testimonial to careful, sympathetic, and yet critical scholarship. By studying it, today's pacifists can learn that the challenges they confront are not, on the whole, novel but on the contrary have been rooted in pacifist experience from the very beginning. Many protest groups might well learn much by reading this study; for in their frequently a-historical enthusiasm they often forget that the world is very old and that most issues which confront mankind are not new.

Although Brock does not deal with pacifism during World War I and in the years from 1919 to our own day, we might well find it instructive to complete the story by suggesting the main lines of American pacifist development since 1914.

In certain respects, World War I was a traumatic event for pacifism as well as for opinion generally. Pacifists before the conflict were all too frequently persuaded by liberalism that a great world war could simply not occur. Both pacifists and liberals were disillusioned. They were forced to rethink their positions and to ask — as Mennonites and Amish had asked from the beginning — whether human development was necessarily onward and upward. Pacifism was challenged to correct many of its somewhat naive pre-war views, just as general thought was forced to question its rather innocent belief in the inevitability of progress.

The conscription law of World War I made no specific provision for alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors and its definition of conscientious objection made it nearly impossible for those not affiliated with the "traditional peace churches" to secure even non-combatant service in the army. The result was that many were imprisoned and even tortured, as Norman Thomas pointed out in his post-war volume *Is Conscience a Crime?* The occasion for the

Methodists, were now affected. Quaker organizations like the American Friends Service Committee placed greater emphasis on peace education, much of which stressed the pacifist position in pamphlet studies and conferences. The Civil Rights movement, by the fifties, in addition to being profoundly influenced by pacifism, was helping to shape American pacifist thought through its experiments in non-violence. Finally, the coming of the Vietnamese war in 1965, certainly became a factor in stimulating a growing receptivity to the pacifist outlook.

The real possibility of nuclear war was, of course, never absent from the American consciousness throughout the years since 1945. It must have led many to be dissatisfied with orthodox "peace" outlooks — particularly those which continued to argue that nations must have more weapons of mass destruction before they could find peace. Such contentions took on an increasingly hollow ring and probably provoked not a few to look at the pacifist tradition with greater sympathy.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming mass of Americans in our day are not pacifists and, indeed, sometimes appear to have greater faith in violence than any other people on earth, if one regard Congress in its attitude to military appropriations as representative. Yet at the very time when this apparent faith in violence is so ubiquitous, one of the largest proportions of Americans in history belong to churches and synagogues where they are presumably taught "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, said the Lord."

In face of this enormous gulf between professed faith and practical faith, what are the prospects for pacifism? Can pacifists bridge the gulf and, if so, how are they to do it? To answer these questions fully would require a book. Here we simply point out some of the strengths pacifists bring to the task and conclude with a few of their weaknesses and their problems.

American pacifism has gained enormously since World War I in its sophistication about the economic roots of war and this should appeal to the so-called realistic non-pacifist. It is also much stronger intellectually as a result of its development of the theory and practice of non-violent resistance; for non-pacifists are unlikely to be persuaded unless pacifists can show them that non-violent forms of power are both less immoral and more efficacious than violent forms. The Civil Rights movement has strengthened the pacifist case in this respect by demonstrating the effectiveness of non-violence, despite the many ambiguities which have undoubtedly been present. Then, too, the

fact that pacifist perspectives have penetrated religious groups outside the traditionally pacifist ones should improve the outlook for the years ahead.

But as American pacifism faces the future, it must also recognize certain weaknesses and problems. Throughout its history, as we have seen, there has been a tension between "involvement" and "withdrawal" type pacifists: the former tend to be caught up in the ostensible imperatives of politics and to attenuate their pacifism; the latter are tempted to become merely pietistic and subjective in their effort to remain pure. Can this tension be transcended? Can American pacifists grapple realistically with political problems and yet retain their basic commitments? It is questions of this kind which pacifists must answer.

One specific issue on which they should become much clearer than in the past is the distinction between violent and non-violent power; between injurious and non-injurious force. Related to this is the need to think out their theory of police work — surely an important question as we face the demands of a world order. Pacifists are not unique in their ambiguities about these issues — non-pacifists are equally confused — but if they are to advance their conceptual clarity and have a greater impact on the world, they must grapple more adequately with them.

In terms of organization, too, American pacifism is weak. Sometimes, it would appear that pacifists, like men in general, are more interested in perpetuating their own small groups than in unifying the movement. While there is no virtue in an organizational unity which has been purchased at cost of principle, surely there must be things that American pacifists could do to coordinate their efforts more effectively.

In the end, of course, American pacifists must deepen the roots of their convictions. Many fall by the wayside, take refuge in clichés, or become socially ineffective — in part because they do not attempt to think and to re-think their position. When their roots are superficial, they may fall easy prey to such rather thoughtless slogans of the moment as those which claim that there is a basic moral distinction between "wars of liberation" and so-called "imperialist" wars. Pacifist roots must be both intellectual and emotional if repetitious sloganeering is to be avoided.

Above all, pacifists must become familiar with their history. By examining it, they may learn to avoid past mistakes, build courage for the future, and gain the insights which will enable them to deal more fully with the delusions of a world still tragically committed to faith in violence.