

Nathan Schneider

The Original Peaceniks

Acts of Conscience

Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy

Joseph Kip Kosek

Columbia University Press, \$50, 376 pp.

In his new history of Christian nonviolence from World War I to Vietnam, Joseph Kip Kosek asks what this movement has offered American democracy, and how much of the offer has been accepted. The book is largely about a single organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), founded in the first months of World War I by European and American liberal Protestant pacifists. The quietism of the historic peace churches—Mennonites, Quakers, and the Brethren—keeps them on the margins of Kosek's story. *Acts of Conscience* follows the Fellowship through its resistance to two world wars, skillfully explains its complex ties with labor during the interwar period, and ends with the triumph of the civil-rights movement.

Many of the men who founded the Fellowship had been missionaries overseas, and their experiences made them question the nationalistic fervor that had led to a devastating war in Europe. Their international experience also made them attentive to racial injustice in the United States, well before the civil-rights struggle captured national attention. They spread their pacifist convictions through other Christian groups such as the YMCA, as well as in military camps for conscientious objectors. Before long they had a considerable presence at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where many of the FOR leaders had been students. Personal uprightness—no to alcohol, yes to family—was prized as much as social conscience. The Fellowship was, and continues to be, a network of peo-

ple who worked through other organizations to advance the cause to which they were radically committed. In its publications, members traded tactics and coordinated efforts. They played a critical behind-the-scenes role in ensuring that the civil-rights movement remained, on the whole, a nonviolent one. Rarely in the headlines itself, the FOR was often behind them.

Kosek refers more than once to a claim by FOR luminary A. J. Muste: "Pacifism must be, is, religious." Whether or not it must be, it usually was. Kosek's book shows that it was believers who led the way in American nonviolence through most of the last century. Secular groups like the War Resisters League, which was founded only a few years after the Fellowship, played at most a supporting role.

But is Christianity itself necessarily pacifist? For most members of the Fellowship, the answer was an unequivocal yes: the teachings and example of Jesus, they believed, require Christians to end violence wherever it occurs. They expressed this conviction

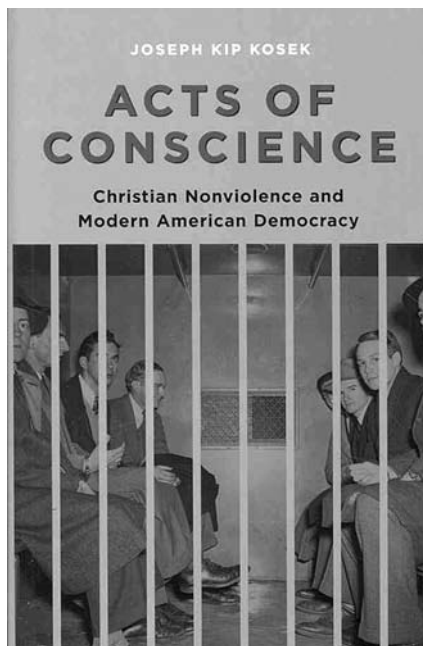
by going to prison, sending delegations to enemy nations, and performing acts of resistance.

Over Kosek's story looms the shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr. He was a figure the Fellowship could never entirely dismiss. Niebuhr had served as the FOR's chair in 1931 and 1932. Within a few years, though, he had left the organization and renounced pacifism in favor of his signature realism—thus becoming the Niebuhr that President Barack Obama has called his "favorite philosopher." As World War II neared, and as the Fellowship struggled to offer alternatives to violence, Niebuhr deemed the crusade against Hitler a just war.

The Catholic critique of pacifism, voiced in this period by John Courtney Murray, among others, seems not to have troubled the Fellowship as much. Because of the Catholic Church's endorsement of just-war theory, "Catholics had been the hardest religious people to attract to the Christian nonviolent vanguard," Kosek writes. This changed, almost overnight, with Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, which shared roots in organized labor with many of the FOR's leaders. Kosek ends his story abruptly with the Vietnam War, and this means that Catholic pacifists like Day, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan—whose influence spread well beyond Catholic circles—receive only cursory treatment.

By leaving out the years since Vietnam, Kosek largely misses the transformation of Christian nonviolence into an interfaith movement. Today, there are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Catholic peace fellowships all operating under the FOR umbrella. And this should come as no surprise. It was, after all, a non-Christian who inspired the Fellowship's method of political action. After living with Mohandas Gandhi in India, FOR member Richard Gregg summarized his ideas in *The Power of Non-Violence*, first published in 1934.

In Gandhi, the Fellowship found a champion and a set of tactics to match its convictions. The members'



openness to the teachings of an Indian lawyer went hand in hand with their longstanding attitude toward race in America. Despite a mostly white membership, the group had always made a point of fighting racism. It organized interracial meetings and demonstrations from its beginning. After World War II, FOR members advised black civil-rights leaders and documented their successes. Martin Luther King Jr. drew on Gregg's book to guide his struggle in the American South, having been given a copy by FOR envoy Glenn Smiley. King himself became a member of the FOR, bringing the Fellowship as close as it would ever get to the American mainstream.

Membership peaked in 1972. Soon the FOR was in a state of decline. The liberal Protestant denominations from which it emerged were losing influence, and Union Theological Seminary, their stronghold, was in financial ruin. Kosek's concluding chapters are elegiac, perhaps more than they should be. He could have said more about the Fellowship's influence on American activism and culture in later years, as well as its own ongoing work. Groups like Christian Peacemaker Teams and Nonviolent Peaceforce, for instance, which both have close ties to today's much-diminished FOR, have pioneered new efforts to realize Gandhi's vision of a nonviolent alternative to war.

Acts of Conscience began as a dissertation, and it sometimes shows. Its pages are full of remarkable people, but none of them emerges from the jagged narrative as a real individual. Kosek offers a helpful outline, but the task remains to collect and coordinate the stories behind a tradition that links Gandhi with King, and the antiwar cause with the civil-rights movement. In any case, the legacy that Kosek presents should not be written about as if it were a relic. It is still very much alive, though its current expressions—Christian and non-Christian—might surprise the Fellowship's original members. ■

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Joel Hafvenstein Stranded

On the Margins of the World

The Refugee Experience Today

Michel Agier

Polity, \$49.95, 152 pp.

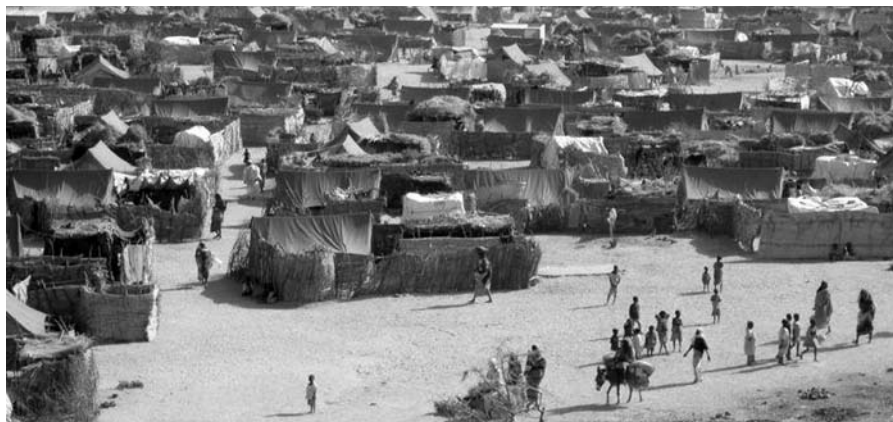
Michel Agier, director of research at the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD), recognizes that for most readers, “alarm calls” about the needs of the marginalized result only in mental and emotional paralysis. In this slender anthropological study, he seeks to reduce the distance between his readers and the world of refugees, making that world comprehensible, not simply pitiable or repellent.

Agier writes thoughtfully and passionately about the plight of his subjects, though fairly dense academic language pervades even his most accessible passages. The book is strongest in its mid-section, “The Desert, The Camp, The City,” where it analyzes the peculiar modern limbo of the refugee camp. The aid agencies who manage refugee camps try to operate by universal humanitarian principles that transcend politics. Agier shows how in practice these universal principles can become a lowest common denominator, creating a space whose inhabitants are stripped of political significance and seen solely in terms of their needs—a world of victims, not of citizens, “in which conversation and freedom are

disturbing and troublesome.” This quarantined, disempowering environment is justified by a fiction of provisionality. In reality, many camps are provisional only for the expatriate workers who are stationed there for six months or a year; the residents remain for decades.

The result can be a humanitarian dystopia, a “transit zone” whose inhabitants never reach any destination. Agier provides illustrations from Kenya's Dadaab camps, established in 1992 and still housing more than 160,000 people, most of them Somalis. True to his intent, he does not show its residents simply as victims of their stifling environment, but movingly describes the ways they challenge its limitations. Over time, they turn their featureless camps into “attempted towns” with a degree of social, economic, and even political vibrancy. In a world designed to be provisional, however, few of their attempts have the space to develop, and inactivity is the stultifying norm.

That ugly situation, Agier suggests, results not from the initial humanitarian emergency (to which camps may be the only logistically possible response), but from subsequent lack of political will to integrate the refugees into society. He calls on his readers to “resist by all means possible the establishment on a global scale of a regime of...interminable delay, as well as other forms of quarantine in which so many millions of undesirables are confined.”



Darfur refugee camp in Chad

MARK KNOBIL