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# Book Reviews

**Russell P. Johnson, *Beyond Civility in Social Conflict: Discourse, Critique, and Religious Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2024. 360 pp. \$130.00 USD. ISBN: 9781009427210.**

For those seeking useful ethical signposts for navigating our increasingly polarized public sphere, this book provides an accessible review of key pathways along with a well-supported road map for a specific communication course, one that incorporates numerous principled paths familiar to Anabaptists seeking to live and speak in the way of peace. Russell P. Johnson, a Mennonite scholar who teaches religious studies and philosophy at the University of Chicago, favors a meandering hike through the social conflict of the culture wars that wends between dialogue and criticism, persisting with both empathy and judgment.

Johnson's book exemplifies the practices of dialogue and criticism he advocates by rehearsing the arguments among three prominent approaches to communication ethics with critical appreciation: "Civility" establishes an etiquette for polite deliberation within the democratic public sphere, stressing the value of a respectful process over the achievement of outcomes. By contrast, "Victory" uses any rhetorical means necessary, including appeals to fear and prejudice, to achieve desired and especially urgent outcomes. Finally, "Open-mindedness" regards any form of persuasion as an act of violence and practices nonjudgmental dialogue focused on mutual understanding instead.

Johnson helpfully compares each of these prominent communication ethics frameworks with similar positions related to the ethics of war. "Civility" adopts moral criteria for arguments that echo just war theory (if not actual just war practice). "Victory" employs an overriding concern for defeating enemies at all costs that is analogous to a crusader mentality. "Open-mindedness" reflects the refusal to participate in war that is comparable to nonresistance and conscientious objection.

For Johnson these three dominant approaches to communication and warfare share a common naivete about the relationship between means and ends—namely, the assumption that means and ends are as distinguishable in practice as they are in theory. For example, "Civility" imagines that criteria for moral means can be maintained against the desire for a specific outcome; "Victory" assumes that virtuous goals will not be corrupted by depraved means; and "Open-mindedness" tends not to be open to the possible morality of persuasion.

Johnson's counterproposal to these standard communication ethics options is "integral communication criticism" (ICC), a perspective based in the social philosophy of nonviolent direct action as developed and practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr., especially his insight that "the end represents the means in process and the ideal in the making." ICC thus assumes that the ethical qualities of communication practices must reflect the goals they seek to accomplish; if we want to achieve a world with more peace and justice, then our communication choices, including the messages we send implicitly, should be peaceable and just through nonverbal and stylistic choices. If we want to build a society that is based on truthful and accurate knowledge, then we must speak truthfully. If we want to achieve liberation, we need to practice communication that avoids domination.

This latter commitment to a form of communication that invites involvement and humanization takes Johnson to the dialogical criticism of Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed," as well as to the mutual consciousness-raising of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's feminist rhetoric—both of which resist monological communication while challenging the illusions and conventions of oppression. Johnson's exploration of the dialogical paths outlined by Freire and Campbell lands him finally in the indirect communication model theorized and practiced by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher of Christian existentialism Søren Kierkegaard, whose writings and teachings seek to liberate Christian faith from the constraining belief systems of Christendom.

In Kierkegaard's Christian model of indirect communication, which is offered as a faithful alternative to the monological dominion of apologetics and theological argumentation, the speaker or writer hides their assumptions and purposes, and possibly even their identity, while building a relationship of trust with their interlocutors, including those who would be otherwise alienated by a direct attack on the illusions of Christendom to which they cling. This relationship-focused habit of communication is a practice of witness and ministry rather than a projection of belief and conformity, and may therefore involve prevarication and concealment—including the affirming of audience perspectives that the speaker opposes—to avoid driving the audience deeper into their illusions. At the same time, a ministering form of indirect communication seeks always to move the audience from corrupting illusions toward an authentic relationship with the divine and specifically with Jesus Christ.

While Johnson assumes that Kierkegaard's indirect form of communication can credibly support the implementation of Integral Communication Criticism, it is questionable whether prevarication and concealment can be justified according to the moral criteria of ICC, where ends are implicit in means. Do we really want a world in which our communication practices give us more deception? Is not ministering to one's audience by concealing one's identity simply a pious form of manipulative and controlling rhetoric?

Here is where the indirect communication displayed by Jesus in the Gospels provides a corrective to Kierkegaard's perhaps overly strategic investment in identification with the audience. From pointed dialogue with his critics to disorienting parables offered to his disciples, Jesus's most common approach to ministry is provocation, some of which provokes a backlash that eventually gets him killed. In the communication ethics of Jesus, such persecution by one's opponents is not a sign of failure but of faithfulness.

Moreover, the model of faithful communication proposed by Jesus in the parable of the sower does not assume that the sower can control the outcome of dissemination, as Kierkegaard seems to do. The seed of the word is offered to all without reserve or cunning, although Jesus nevertheless weeps because his audience rejects the things that make for peace—suggesting that resisting the temptation to control audience reception does not necessarily compromise sympathy and identification.

Whether or not Kierkegaard's indirect communication model exceeds the bounds of ICC, the wisdom and worth of the dialogical and critical model of communication ethics that Johnson advocates in this book is not in question. Both in the church and in the broader public sphere, this deeply informed call for both dialogue and criticism is timely and should prove useful to all who seek to move the world toward more peace and justice with their words—even if the tongue that utters them is difficult to tame or control, as the epistle of James reminds us.

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**Jonathan Bornman, *American Murids: A Lived Practice of Nonviolence*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2024. 281 pp. \$129.95 (Canada), \$99.95 (US) (hardcover), ebook \$99.95 (US). ISBN: 978-1-63667-144-4.**

Every peace church college or university should have a copy of *American Murids: A Lived Practice of Nonviolence*. So should many congregations. While the book recounts a primarily social-scientific study, it teaches us about another version of faith-based nonviolence in practice and philosophy. That it is a *Muslim* version of those faith practices will help North Americans counteract the predominant understanding of Islam as an inherently violent religion. Let's be honest—historically speaking, Christianity was and remains an inherently violent faith also.