

*Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties*, by Perry Bush

reviewed by [Alain Epp Weaver](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

Perry Bush has set himself a daunting task: to tell the story of Mennonite pacifism from World War I through Vietnam. Drastic theological shifts, the expansion of denominational bureaucracies in response to wartime pressures, the experiences of individual draftees: all are part of this complex narrative. To tell his story Bush skillfully weaves together denominational reports, personal accounts and oral interviews from several archives.

At the beginning of this century most Mennonites subscribed to a two-kingdom theology that distanced the church from the violence of the state. The Mennonite doctrine of nonresistance mandated submission to the state and renunciation of all forms of coercion. Mennonite theologian Guy Hersberger joined with Reinhold Niebuhr in castigating liberal pacifism for its overly optimistic view of human potential and in defining Gandhian nonviolence as non-Christian coercion. However, as denominational leaders negotiated with government officials during World War II for the establishment of Civilian Public Service camps for conscientious objectors and as Mennonite youth in those camps encountered the more active pacifism of other COs, attitudes toward political involvement began to change.

During the '50s Mennonite leaders used the rubric of the "Lordship of Christ" to open the doors to limited appeals to the state. Christ is Lord of all of creation, including the state, they reasoned; therefore, Christians could appeal to the state to improve its practice, without expecting it to conform to the standard of nonresistant love. The suspicion of nonviolent resistance also slowly broke down. Looking back to the prophetic example of their Anabaptist forebears, Mennonites argued that a modern Anabaptism "would countenance, even demand, nonviolent initiatives on behalf of peace and justice."

Bush also charts the ways in which this century's wars shaped the ethnic and ecclesial character of Mennonite identity. Wartime patriotic fervor forced Mennonites to define themselves both as adherents of their religion and as Americans. The mobilization of resources and people demanded by war often brought Mennonites--who refused to buy war bonds or participate in prowar assemblies—into conflict with

their nonpacifist neighbors.

But while many Mennonites adhered to official denominational positions against any participation in war efforts, others succumbed to the lure of patriotic militarism and joined the armed forces. Many readers will be surprised by the disparity Bush uncovers between the theological positions on peace espoused by denominational leaders and the wartime choices of members. For example, only 46 percent of Mennonite draftees during World War II opted for conscientious objection. More than half choose either full or noncombatant military service. Such statistics impelled Mennonite leaders to accelerate their efforts to educate youth about the denomination's peace position.

Not only did wars test the Mennonite commitment to peace, but they also provided the opportunity for bureaucratic expansion. "Safe from a persecuting government, the church could launch new missions programs, educational organizations and relief efforts," Bush observes. The price for this freedom to expand was silence in the face of the American military machine. But already during World War II some Mennonites began to view such silence as tantamount to complicity in the war effort. By the time of the war in Vietnam, many participated in antiwar protests and some even advocated nonregistration for the draft.

Bush's contention that the history of Mennonite pacifism poses a corrective challenge to theories of modernization which expect the church to succumb to compartmentalization also deserves careful consideration, as does his discussion of the influence of evangelical and fundamentalist theologies on the denomination. His ear for telling anecdote and his wide range make his thorough exploration of Mennonite history a joy to read.