

Radical, peaceful, Christian: Rethinking pacifism through climate activism

Geke van Vliet, PhD candidate University of Pretoria

Rethinking Pacifism in the Age of Climate Crisis

Across Europe and beyond, we are witnessing a rise in radical forms of climate activism. Protesters block roads, interrupt public events, and throw food or paint on artworks and buildings. In the Netherlands, hundreds of climate activists block a part of the highway every month, demanding the government to stop subsidising fossil fuels, smaller groups block railroads, preventing trains with charcoal to go through. These acts, while controversial, are rooted in a non-violent ethic. Groups like Extinction Rebellion, Christian Climate Action, and Letzte Generation (now Neue Generation) embody what I call *radical pacifism*: the use of disruptive but peaceful action to challenge systems of ecological destruction.

This presentation argues that, contrary to popular belief, such activism is not only compatible with pacifism, but a vital expression of it. I will first outline what pacifism means in this context, then explore two case studies of Christian climate activists—Andrea Rückert from Germany and Daniel Tangkilisan from Indonesia—to demonstrate how their actions embody a radical, Christian pacifism. Finally, I will challenge fellow Christians, especially those in the West, to move beyond passive neutrality and toward a pacifism that is active, justice-oriented, and disruptive when necessary. This presentation is, therefore, primarily intended for white people in the Western world who live in a sense of false peace.

Defining Pacifism: From Passivity to Active Resistance

Pacifism is often misunderstood as passivity—a refusal to engage, a reluctance to disturb the peace. In societies where violence is normalised, pacifism can seem naïve or idealistic.

Pacifism is then defined as the absence of violence, refraining from all violence, without presenting positive alternatives. I hope most of us would question the naivety and agree that pacifism can present a serious alternative to the use of violence. True pacifism is not about neutrality, not about refraining from violence; it is about active non-violence and the pursuit of *just peace*.

“Negative” pacifism, as defined in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy*, views peace as the absence of war. This view often results in what I call *passivist pacifism*—an attitude that avoids conflict. This happens, in my view, especially in settings where conflict is not a daily encounter.

In contrast, *positive pacifism* focuses on peaceful alternatives to violence. It understands peace as the presence of justice, cooperation, and human dignity. It calls for non-violent yet confrontational action when necessary.

This kind of pacifism includes a spectrum of tactics, include protests, demonstrations, marching, petitioning, lobbying – the ‘cooperative’ method. There are also more disruptive forms: strikes, boycotts, etc. Finally, there are nonviolent interventions, such as civil disobedience, the last step before resistance becomes violent.

Climate activists are engaging in active pacifism through non-violent action. While one who holds a negative pacifist definition – that means one where the absence of war is seen as peace – might think that climate activism is violent because it is disruptive, the non-violent action of climate activists is trying to confront power to work on positive peace. I will now introduce two examples of climate activism, two climate activists.

Three Case Studies of Active Pacifism

1. Andrea Rückert – Letzte Generation (Germany)

Pastor Andrea Rückert describes her involvement with Letzte Generation, a German climate movement known for blocking roads to demand fossil fuel reform in the book *Gemeinsam Anders*. She recounts the story of her first time blocking a road in Berlin –discussing how to react non-violently, even when faced with physical aggression from the public.

She explains her activism as a moral obligation. Living in Germany, where protest is relatively safe, she believes it is her responsibility to use that privilege to stand in solidarity with those most affected by climate injustice. Critics, including her own church, argue that such tactics alienate the public. The church argues that ‘this form of protest only diminishes support for climate politics,’ ‘that churches should keep everyone on board.’ Rückert notes that the church only wants to keep those on board that they have on board, but that this excludes people from the Global South or for example people with chronic illnesses who suffer most under a changing climate. The church is living in this sense of peace where peace is the absence of war. Rückert’s protest is seen as radical. But Rückert reframes what it means to be radical: *it is not radical to block traffic; it is radical to carry on as usual while others suffer*. Her actions are grounded in a deeply Christian commitment to justice and peace, not passive acceptance.

2. Daniel Frits Maurits Tangkilisan – SaveKarimunjawa (Indonesia)

In a different context, Daniel Tangkilisan, a Christian environmental and human right activist in Indonesia, was sentenced to prison for a Facebook post defending the right to a healthy environment. Tangkilisan belongs to the Karimunjawa Struggle Movement, a movement that aims to protect both the marine reserve Karimunjawa National Park as well as people who suffer from human rights violations from illegal shrimp farming. His peaceful advocacy for marine conservation and human rights was criminalized under the pretense of hate speech. Though seemingly less disruptive than street protests in Europe, Tangkilisan’s actions were radical within his political and cultural context. By speaking out, he disrupted a status quo that silenced dissent. The Indonesian government is using a law on digital security to criminalise digital forms of protest. Yet, for Tangkilisan, the right to a healthy environment and the human rights of people working and living in Indonesia are more critical than not breaking the law. His pacifism was not passive—it risked personal freedom to promote justice and protect vulnerable communities.

3. Vanessa Nakate – RiseUp Movement (Uganda)

Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan climate justice activist and founder of the Rise Up Movement, is another example of pacifist climate resistance. She started her activism with solo climate strikes in Kampala in 2019, dealing with the challenges of social expectations. Nakate has emphasised non-violent advocacy and focuses on awareness campaigns in schools in Uganda. Her activism is aimed at the disproportionate impact of climate change in Africa, calling for global climate solutions that include marginalised voices. She herself got cropped out of a photo at the World Economic Forum in Davos—a moment that highlighted racial bias in climate activism coverage—to restrictions on public protests in Uganda. Nevertheless, Nakate continues to speak boldly on global stages, including the United Nations, urging for intersectional climate justice. Her work embodies radical pacifism: despite the challenges that would make it easy to stay silent, she stands up against power and demands big system change. Her activism furthermore empowers many young people – especially girls – in Uganda.

Why Christians Must Embrace Radical Pacifism

Three Christian climate activists who live up to the call to speak up for justice. Their examples show that radical pacifism is not necessarily about extremism, but about conviction.

Rückert and Tangkilisan both broke laws without resorting to violence. Rückert has to deal with negative responses from her church, which does not seem to understand why she wants to create conflict. For Tangkilisan, the situation is different because the conflict is right there. He sees the injustices happening, Rückert stands up against seemingly invisible injustices, but she shows that the absence of violence does not mean that justice is present. They both accepted personal risk for the sake of justice. Their actions may differ in method and consequence, but both embody Christian, non-violent resistance to systems of harm. Nakate, although it might not seem radical from a Western European context, is overcoming social boundaries. By standing up for climate justice, she had to overcome the expectations of her getting married, staying quiet as a young person, and especially as a young woman. She decided not to and has managed to raise awareness, also on an intersectional level. Too often, especially in Western societies, pacifism becomes an excuse for inaction. We fear conflict, and so we maintain a superficial peace—what we in Dutch call *de lieve vrede*. But this false peace sustains injustice. We must resist the temptation to stay “in the middle” and instead embrace the discomfort of faithful radical action. True pacifism, particularly Christian pacifism as Raiser and Schmitthenner argue in the book *Gerechter Friede*, calls us to *disrupt*—not with violence, but with visible, courageous resistance. Although media highlight the negative opinion on such forms of protest, history shows that these radical actions help to shift the public opinion. Simon Teune, researcher at the Free University of Berlin, argues that such protests help disrupt the status quo; it is the radicality that changes us. Non-violence, *geweldloosheid*, *gewaltvrijheid*, is not just the absence of harm; it is the presence of justice. It means promoting justice, not just avoiding wrongdoing. Whether we post something on social media, stand outside the government with protest signs – in the Western world not immediately risky steps – or turn to more disruptive forms of activism, it is important to not be afraid to speak up. As pacifists, we are called to speak truth to power.

From Non-Violence to Pro-Justice

Radical climate activism challenges us to reimagine pacifism. It is not enough to oppose war and violence in theory. If we want a livable planet and a just world, we must be willing to confront injustice wherever it exists—even when that means breaking unjust laws or disrupting daily life. The climate crisis is a threat to the (already false) peace in Europe. It is thereby a perfect reason for those in Europe who have become too comfortable to become active pacifists again. While the churches in Europe deal with the climate crisis in various ways, they hardly ever provide room for radical activism.

This month, the World Council of Churches will launch the ecumenical decade of climate justice action. In a radical statement, they call for system change, they call for activism, advocacy, and accountability. As Mennonites we are called to take up these roles and become active pacifists and pacifist activists, within our means.

Climate action is at the heart of radical pacifism: not passive neutrality, but active radicality. As Christians, we are called not just to avoid doing harm, but to *do good*. That means stepping out of our comfort zones and into the streets, the courts, the churches, and the public discourse—to speak, act, and live in a way that promotes just peace for all creation. Radical pacifism, rooted in radical reformation, must include disrupting the current systems and practices that perpetuate injustices – even if they do not directly affect us – and speaking up to promote just alternatives for all. We are not only called to be non-violent. We are called to be *pro-justice*.

References

- Cady, D. L., 2023, "Pacifism: Theories of," in Sellers, M. and Stephan Kirste (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht.
- Gokkon, B., 2024, "Indonesian activist freed in hate speech case after flagging illegal shrimp farms," *Mongabay*, viewed May 14, 2025, from <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/05/daniel-frits-maurits-tangkilisan-indonesia-environmental-activist-exonerated-illegal-shrimp-farm-hate-speech-karimunjawa-marine-protected-area/>.
- Nakate, V., 2021, *A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis*, Mariner Books, Boston.
- Raiser, K. and Schmitthenner, U., 2013, *Gerechter Friede: Ein ökumenischer Aufruf zum Gerechten Frieden*, Lit-Verlag, Berlin.
- Rückert, A., 2025, "Als Pfarrerin im Klimaaktivismus mit der 'Letzten Generation,'" in Tangkilisan, D. F. M., n.d., "Daniel Frits Maurits Tangkilisan," viewed May 14, 2025, from <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/daniel-frits-maurits-tangkilisan>.
- Thimm, K., 2023, "Warum die Aktionen der Letzten Generation auf solchen Widerstand stoßen," *Spiegel*, viewed May 12, 2025, from <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/warum-die-aktionen-der-letzten-generation-auf-solchen-widerstand-stossen-a-a724b4c1-fcc5-43e9-bd85-eb2f05848ba2>.
- Vecera, S. (ed.), *Gemeinsam Anders: für eine vielfältige und gerechte Zukunft*, Bene! Solms.