I have often described George Fox University as a school founded by Quakers and taken over by Evangelicals; I am Catholic, which helps to explain some of my bewilderment by the ways these two traditions seem to clash, particularly in the area of pacifism. There seems to be a great deal of ambivalence between the two positions, as the ideal of peace seems to be contradictory to the conflation of God and country. My own ambivalence fits well in this air: As the mother of a man who spent six years in the Air Force including a stint in Afghanistan, and as the wife of a now-retired police sergeant, I have lived within the institutions that assume force is necessary to keep the peace. I am proud of my son, and I am proud of my husband. I know they both did good work in their jobs. But I am conflicted, because I dislike the nature of what they both did. How do I separate the evils of a prison system with the evils that my husband faced every day on the street, and often helped to stop? How do I reconcile these systems with a belief that Jesus taught us to be better than that? I do identify as a pacifist, for the most part, but I also got a new Smith and Wesson .357 magnum for Christmas, although I am opposed to nearly every word from the pulpit of the NRA, and I find war to be the ultimate evil.

Such ambivalence bothers my family and some friends, and it used to bother me, feeling as I did that somehow maturity requires me to slap labels on my beliefs and tuck them away as finished, but I find ambivalence is my most useful tool in the classroom. It allows me to play devil’s advocate in ways that challenge my students to think for themselves, because I can so often
see both sides of an issue. (Not all issues...I’m not a saint!) Ambivalence also gave me the intellectual space to be led to my most recent project: the consideration of the congruencies between Virginia Woolf and her Quaker aunt, Caroline Stephen.

While most scholars have assiduously asserted Woolf’s atheism as a member of Bloomsbury and an early Modernist, a close examination of her work in the light of her aunt’s Quaker theology suggests there was a considerable amount of influence between the two. Caroline Stephen was a Quaker mystic who is credited for the revival of Quakerism at the end of the nineteenth century, most notably through her book, *Quaker Strongholds*. Her conversion to Quakerism from the strongly paternalistic Clapham traditions of her famous family was a reaction against what she felt was a religion that excluded her as a woman.

Virginia’s father, Caroline’s brother, Leslie Stephen, was a famous writer and philosopher who turned from a life propelling him to the clergy to a life of atheism because of his inability to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the idea of a benevolent and just God. It is widely assumed that his perspective, to which his second wife, Julia Prinsep Jackson Stephen, was equally sympathetic, influenced Virginia’s own antipathy to the church. My own studies suggest that while that may be true to an extent, the leap that most scholars make, that Virginia was also therefore atheist, is less apparent. It is entirely possible, especially through the lens of ambivalence, to be antipathetic to the church without necessarily being antipathetic to God. Certainly, Caroline’s own experience provided Virginia with the model of what that might look like, and Virginia’s work often reflects the nuances that Caroline suggests in her work.
For Virginia’s parents, evil manifested itself as the death of each of their first spouses; the ensuing grief led them to disbelieve in a loving God, to the extent that Leslie Stephen wrote An Agnostic’s Apology, scathingly “disproving,” as he felt, the existence of God. Caroline, on the other hand, while recognizing the existence of evil, felt that our travails were not thrust upon us by God, but could constitute paths of grace that would lead us to God. She illustrates a conception of evil very different from that of Leslie, not only in its impersonality but in its very association with suffering:

What my whole soul protests against is the identification of suffering with evil. I know how strong is the tendency (I fear there is an increasing tendency in our day) to hedonistic views of life, and how much they are supported by utilitarian ethics, and indeed by whatever teaching fails to distinguish pain from evil. I cannot believe such views to be at bottom reconcilable with the religion of the Cross. The very mainspring of that religion lies, as I believe, in the proof and the pledge it affords of the power of faith to transmute all pain into blessing. (“Christian Science” 5)

God’s purpose is not, she argues, to heed our beck and call, to make our lives easier, especially when making our lives easier might make someone else’s life more difficult. Confuting
the idea that a benevolent and personal God would equate to a life free from suffering, she says that pain or pleasure, joy or sorrow, are not “intrinsically either good or bad. I believe them in themselves to be indifferent. I believe both to be continual means of discipline or spiritual education, and therefore in the Divine hand powerful for good. I am not sure that they may not be in some mysterious sense one thing” (5). Therefore, concluding that there is no God because there is suffering and/or evil is illogical to her. “As Christians we are called before all things to take up our Cross and follow Christ. It grieves me that His Name should be used in urging people to reject suffering” (6). There is, then, what she would call a “moralizing benefit” to pain, whose existence has nothing whatsoever to do with evidence of God’s being. As, she says, a “detailed acquaintance with pain and evil in all their forms has been accompanied by a growth of sensitiveness to suffering, whether our own or other people’s,” a concomitant assumption has arisen “that pain ought not to exist, that it is of necessity an evil” (53). Speaking of those who are staggered by the suffering in the world but who successfully endure, she might almost be speaking directly to Leslie:

These ask, not what God ought to allow, but how we ought

to meet that which is allowed; not whether the infliction of pain can

be morally justifiable, but whether the endurance of it can be made

morally profitable. They ask, not for consolation, but for strength.

Possibly there may be no consolation to be had, but there is always
the need to endure. If we can but find firm ground on which to stand upright and to meet our lot without loss of self-respect or lowering of aim, it will be time enough after the battle has been fought and won to ask how the conflict arose. Meanwhile, it is in fighting the battle that we shall answer such questions as it behooves us to ask.

(54-55)

Virginia’s own sense of evil was closer to Caroline’s than to Leslie’s, rooted as it is not in personal loss but in the greater global senselessness of war, poverty, and oppression. Virginia did not seem to rail against God in taking those she loved – despite having nervous breakdowns after the deaths of her mother and father, and despite the sudden deaths of her half-sister Stella and her brother Thoby – but she railed against the system that sent young men to die in war, especially after her nephew Julian Bell was killed in Spain. Her fierce pacifism only increased as she grew older, until she felt alienated by patriotism, “violent and filthy passions” that could be “so revolting” that she was nearly sick (Briggs 89). Believing, with many other intellectuals around her, that “War is the worst of all evils” as Clive Bell wrote, even insisting that a Nazi Europe would be better than war (Briggs 326), she could not abide the thought of men fighting for matters that boiled down to greed. In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” written in August of 1940, she listens to the guns and bombs going off around her, and ponders what it will take to make peace, adding, much as she does in Three Guineas, that only when we eradicate the love of violence and of medals in our
young men will we be able to move forward, and that as women, this is what we must do. But it must be done internationally as well, and then we will be free of the desire to dominate, the thing that creates so many little Hitlers (Death of the Moth).

It is this cause that propelled Woolf into a life of politics, though she is aware, as she writes about Mary Wollstonecraft, that “The reformer’s love of humanity, which has so much of hatred in it as well as love, fermented within her” (Second Common Reader 158). Virginia was conflicted in this as in many other areas of life, as Alison Light notes: “Publicly and polemically, Woolf was anti-empire and deeply anti-authoritarian; privately, she often sounds like a ‘Little Englander’” (“Response” 149). Jane Marcus says it is Caroline’s Quaker pacifism that is “the source of the pacifism of Virginia Woolf” (Patriarchy 82), as it represents a “bourgeois feminist withdrawal from the struggle against patriarchy” (82). She says the mysticism in the writing of both Virginia and Caroline “is an imaginatively fulfilling substitute for mounting the barricades, a passive-aggressive protest against the violence of the men in their families, which violence they then describe as a characteristic of the male sex” (Marcus Patriarchy 82).

Woolf’s beginnings in the pacifist movement were not promising; she had many of the same reservations she had with the suffragists in that they did not seem to her particularly well-organized or intelligent. In 1918, she had her brother Adrian and his wife Karin to dinner; Adrian had just spoken to the Guild on Peace, and she recorded in her diary:

The women were more stirred than usual, though their
reasoning isn’t very very strong; & they are of course ignorant. But they would all have peace tomorrow, on any terms, & abuse our government for leading us on after a plan of its own. When asked to join a Peace Meeting in Hyde Park on Sunday, Mrs Langston, as spokeswoman, intimated that on no account could they violate the Sabbath. What a terrible grip Xtianity still has – she became rigid and bigoted at once, as if God himself had her in his grasp. That I believe is still the chief enemy – the fear of God. But I was tactful enough to keep this view dark. (Diary One 165)

By 1935, although many of her friends were Conscientious Objectors, she could still report: “Went to Peace Conference, by way of a joke, yesterday, & saw several baboon faced intellectuals; also some yearning, sad, green dressed negroes and negresses, looking like chimpanzees brought out of their cocoanut groves to try to make sense of our pale white platitudes” (Diary Four 349). Her contempt, rooted in racism as well as classism, was a barrier for her in taking such organizations seriously. Far more effective, she believed, as she wrote in her “Memoir of Julian Bell,” is to “fight intellectually” and to “evolve some plan for fighting English tyranny. The moment force is used, it becomes meaningless & unreal to me” (Platform of Time 28).

Write she did. In producing Three Guineas, Virginia made her points abundantly clear:
patriarchy was responsible for all the ills in the world, including war, poverty and oppression. She considers all the different points of view in the world, including that of an “educated man’s daughter,” all of which differ. But, she asks, “is there no absolute point of view? Can we not find somewhere written up in letters of fire or gold, ‘This is right. This wrong’? – a moral judgment which we must all, whatever our differences, accept?” (13). She considers asking the clergy, the arbiters of morality, but finds they also cannot agree on the rightness or wrongness of war, but, she notes, they are also products of the same patriarchal system. Somewhere, she decides, there must be both written and unwritten laws, laws to which not everyone has access:

That [unwritten] laws exist, and are observed by civilized people, is fairly generally allowed; but it is beginning to be agreed that they were not laid down by “God,” who is now very generally held to be a conception, of patriarchal origin, valid only for certain races, at certain stages and times; nor by nature, who is now known to vary greatly in her commands and to be largely under control; but have to be discovered afresh by successive generations, largely by their own efforts of reason and imagination. (218)

If such is true, she says, then we must revise these laws, making new ones for a new society of people (who shall be Outsiders) that will reject the former laws that accept tyranny as a
God-given right. Women, particularly excluded from the running of “their” country, must recognize that this country

denies me the means of protecting myself, forces me to pay
others a very large sum annually to protect me, and is so little able,
even so, to protect me that Air Raid precautions are written on the wall. Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or ‘our’
country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country. (128-129)

Here she announces, famously (and most often taken out of context) that an Outsider will know that “as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (129). Patriotism, which she does not separate from jingoism, is misplaced in a woman who has no part in either the goals of war or its impulses. *Three Guineas* can only be read as a feminist, pacifist screed, a fact that some readers decry and others applaud; the logic of its argument has been attacked; the conclusions Woolf reaches are somewhat simplistic. But her point abides. War cannot be the answer for a moral and humane state. In this, Virginia goes still further than her aunt’s Quaker pacifism, as she attempts to proscribe a new way
of being from which Caroline shied away. Caroline, emphatic about her pacifism, saw it as a way
to “guard our own liberty” but refrained from “attempting to limit that of others” (*Quaker
Strongholds* 97). She contends that their “conscientious abstinence from certain practices” should
not be read as “reproach or blame upon those practices,” as others may be “acting in obedience to
their own measure of light” (97). Declining to judge others, she understood that no law can apply
“at once and equally to all. The homeward road cannot be altogether the same for dwellers on the
hill and dwellers on the plain; the goal alone is one” (97). Refuting the pessimism inherent in
Leslie, and demonstrated in Virginia, Caroline believed in the inner light of each person, a light
that, once heeded, would guide everyone to a moral life; such a life, she felt sure, would of
necessity preclude war. She concedes that initially she “seriously hesitated to accept” the tenet of
pacifism:

So long as I understood it to be accompanied by or based
upon any condemnation of those who conscientiously believe that
their duty to God requires them to yield unqualified obedience to the
demands of their country for military service, I was unable to accept
it. But when I came to understand that the Quaker testimony against
all war did not take the form of any ethical theory of universal
application, but was simply the acting out in one’s own person and
at one’s own risk of obedience to that which one’s own heart had
been taught to recognize as Divine authority, even where its commands transcended and came into collision with those of the nation, I felt at once that the position was not only perfectly tenable, but was the only one worthy of faithful disciples. (98-99)

Caroline’s measured approach to faith seems dramatically different from both Virginia and Leslie, who insist on their positions vociferously; it is perhaps her reticence to proscribe the beliefs of others that allows Virginia to explore some of her ideas, and we can trace her influence upon Virginia, even when that influence led Virginia to reject those ideas.

In the end, both Caroline and Leslie admit they are unlikely to change the opinions of those who are already in disagreement with them. Leslie knows that the faithful will refuse his logic, and Caroline knows that those who are not already convinced will object to her certainty. Rather, in an argument that hints at universalism, Caroline finds hope in individual differences, and suggests that if we were to tune into those differences, we might approach “better mutual understanding;” she suggests that our religious differences “are actually the result of opposing and incompatible theories [or] the inevitable outcome of differences in mental constitution or original temperament” (Vision 4). Seeming to respond directly to Leslie’s own argument, she notes that it would be valuable to “consider how emotional differences, by the degree in which they colour experience, may disguise and veil a real agreement in thought, just as we know that sympathetic emotion may easily disguise a real diversity of belief” (Vision 4). Leslie’s emotional reaction
against God may be just the thing to convince other like-minded people, but is inadequate, according to Caroline, as a logical treatise. In what appears to be a rare moment of agreement, Leslie had written in *The Science of Ethics*, “The evolution of opinion is part of the whole evolution; and it may appear upon further investigation that opinions which present themselves as radically opposed, are, when properly considered, nothing more than the partial views of the truth which have commended themselves to persons under different conditions” (36). While this may appear to be as open and inclusive as Caroline’s concession, there is little in Leslie’s argument that allows for another opinion than his, and his idea of “partial views of the truth” is more limiting than Caroline’s “agreement in thought.”

Such absolutism in perspective is part of the difficulty we now face in discussing war and peace in the classroom. There is little room for ambiguity, much less ambivalence, and the national discourse has renamed ambivalence as “flip-flopping,” as if taking anything but a fully realized, inviolable, and everlasting position on every issue is indicative of a weak mind. That approach, however, disallows for a recognition that these issues are difficult, and that the seemingly contradictory opinions of people such as Virginia Woolf and Caroline Stephen are not indicators that they are mere women who can’t understand the difficult issues, but rather that they are thoughtful and intelligent women who understand there is more to pacifism than a knee-jerk patriotic reaction that privileges a nationalist perspective over a human perspective. I use Caroline Stephen’s ideal of “agreement in thought” increasingly as I teach literature, and especially as I teach in our interdisciplinary senior capstone course on Islam and the West. The concept that we all have
more in common than our differences might suggest is nothing new, of course, but to teach Islam from the perspective of the Islamic worldview, suggesting that I have some ambivalence about the Christian worldview myself, opens up their eyes to not just an awareness of Islam (or any other culture) as less of a threat, but also opens their eyes to the beauty of a world lived ambiguously. War and peace, such apparent binaries, must be understood as existing on a continuum, and we ourselves must be understood as sliding along that continuum, back and forth, throughout our lives.