

# Patterns of Violence

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



BAYLOR  
UNIVERSITY

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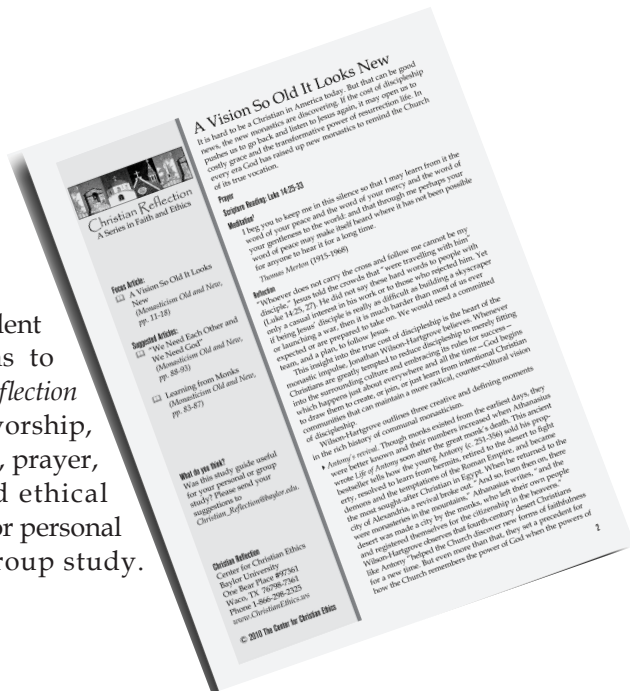
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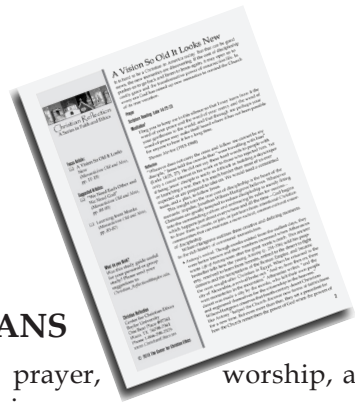


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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**We live in a violent society that is spawning a culture of violence. Our contributors examine some salient patterns of violence and our prurient voyeurism of them, and they propose better responses to them for congregations.**

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**W**e live in a violent society that is spawning a culture of violence. Even though many of us have suffered the wrenching effects of near-constant international warfare, crime in our communities, and abuse in our homes, we are developing a taste for consuming ever more disturbing images of these things in our television shows, movies, video games, books, and daily newsfeeds. In this issue our contributors examine some of the salient patterns of violence in the world and our prurient voyeurism of them, and they propose better responses to them for congregations.

In some circles of cultural discourse the Church's prophetic analysis of these problems and attempt to offer solutions for them has been muted because it is assumed that religions are peculiarly prone to instigating violence today. In *Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power* (p. 11), William Cavanaugh agrees that "people can and do commit violence in the name of God." But he challenges the stronger claim that there is something called "religion" that is more likely to cause violence than what is not religion. This "myth of religious violence" is a dangerous "ideological justification for the dominance of secular social orders, which can and do inspire violence," he warns. It "leads us to turn a blind eye to the causes of non-Western grievances against the Western world."

"Violence is lodged at the center of the Christian gospel, in the crucifixion of Jesus," Mark Heim admits in *The End of Scapegoating* (p. 20). But rather than condoning or inciting further violence, Christ's crucifixion plays a key role in exposing one of the most violent ways humans deal with communal problems—the scapegoating sacrifice—and rejects it. Following the pioneering work of René Girard, Heim explains the significance of this for



the Church: “as a new community formed through identification with the crucified one, the Church is dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice.”

In *Reflections on Christian Courage* (p. 28), Candace Vogler explores the temptation, in both our personal lives and communal decisions, to do evil “in the hope that we will save face or make the world a better place through sinning.” We are tempted to think nothing—adultery, faithlessness, murder, torture, and so on—is really prohibited if the consequences are good enough. To resist the lure of such “consequentialism” will require courage to face the future by trusting in God, and in this we have Christ as our model. “Christ did *not* sin when sorely tempted to do so,” Vogler explains. “He did not do evil expecting good to come of it. He suffered when this was necessary, and stood firm.”

The term “moral injury” was coined recently for the haunting psychological, social, and spiritual damage that persons can suffer when they do, fail to prevent, or even witness a terrible wrongdoing. We know it is one of the most lasting effects of warfare, but it is also a hazard wherever grave violence occurs. In *Recovering from Moral Injury* (p. 35), Keith G. Meador, William C. Cantrell, and Jason Nieuwsma speak to the necessity of addressing this issue through faith communities. “Churches should welcome the morally wounded with eucharistically formed practices of hospitality,” they write. “In gratitude for the great gift of the Eucharist, we can do no other than to invite the wounded neighbor into a community of redemption and healing.”

How should we respond to viewing the violence that pervades news reports, sports, movies, music, video games, and literature? It lures us to be voyeurs, drinking it in as entertainment. Some Christians adopt a no-garbage-in isolation from these cultural objects while others promote an all-things-are-lawful participation. Both approaches are spiritually dangerous, Daniel Train suggests in *Consuming Violence: Voyeurism versus Vision* (p. 63). “Neither demonstrates a genuine regard for the victim of violence; neither accepts the personal risk and responsibility required by a sincere encounter. Instead, both encourage us to either peek or not at the world before us, while preserving the comforts of our own carefully constructed ‘realities.’” We have case studies of responding to civic violence with genuine regard for its victims in Al Miles’s *Responding to Domestic Violence and Spiritual Abuse* (p. 71) and Walt Draughon’s *The Disturbing Work of Resurrection* (p. 75). Noting that the victims of sexual and domestic violence “will frequently turn first to spiritual leaders and lay congregation members when seeking refuge,” Miles gives sage advice on how “to acquire the proper training to respond in an appropriate and effective manner.” Draughon recounts how his church for fifteen years built “meaningful, cross-cultural relationships with the people and congregations” that were most traumatized by “the shooting death of an African American teenager during a traffic stop in the

Midtown area of St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1996.”

The worship service (p. 46) by Bruce and Carolyn Gillette draws together the threads from these spheres of violence: domestic abuse of spouses and children, injustice toward workers, warfare, and the celebration of violence in popular media. A new hymn by Carolyn Gillette, “O Christ, You Did No Violence” (p. 43), leads us to confess that in these spheres “We tolerate injustice that breaks the human soul; / we overlook the madness as violence takes its toll,” and then to pray that God will “make us new, till peace becomes our pattern.” By using some additional hymn texts provided by Carolyn Gillette, the worship service can be adapted easily to reflect on some specific patterns of violence.

One of the most striking and deeply reflective portrayals of the violence intended to humiliate Jesus is found in Fra Angelico’s *The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic* (cover), as Heidi Hornik explains in *Meditating on Christ’s Suffering* (p. 60). In *Depicting Martyrdom* (p. 56), Hornik contrasts the depictions of martyrdom in the Renaissance and Baroque eras. She focuses specifically on Andrea Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian* and Caravaggio’s *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*.

In *American Religions and War* (p. 81), Sarah Koenig reviews four recent books—John Carlson and Jonathan Ebel’s anthology, *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*, Harry S. Stout’s *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, Philip Jenkins’s *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*, and Jonathan Ebel’s *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War*—that expose how we are drawn to supply religious justifications for modern warfare. “Examining the key conflicts in U.S. history, these books bring into sharp relief how frequently Americans have equated their government’s military aims with the will of God,” she writes. “They invite us to contend more soberly with Americans’ long love affair with holy war motifs.”

David Cloutier, in *What Kind of Religion Is Safe for Society?* (p. 87), applies to our current political debates some insights from William T. Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, Keith Ward’s *Is Religion Dangerous?*, and the anthology *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* edited by Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs. He locates a fundamental difference between Ward’s fondness for “a generalized spirituality at the heart of all traditions in their genuine form” and other authors’ preference for “a genuine commitment to a peaceful Christianity.” This difference stems, in part, from their competing evaluations of our advanced Western society: Is it basically benign, or devoted to world hegemony? All of these books are a welcome alternative to the current “sloppy speech about religion and violence,” Cloutier judges; but most importantly, they lead us to ask, “where are the Christians speaking about and acting for real peace out of their deepest faith convictions?” ❖

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# Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power

BY WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH

The idea that “religion” is peculiarly prone to violence is not based in fact, but is an ideological justification for the dominance of secular social orders, which can and do inspire violence. The myth of religious violence leads us to turn a blind eye to the causes of non-Western grievances against the Western world.

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**T**he recent frequency of Islamist militant attacks in the name of God has added fuel to a long-standing Western notion that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence. The subject in this common notion is not just certain forms of Islamism or Islam in general but “religion,” a category that is commonly held to include Christianity, Hinduism, and other major world faiths. The common Western notion is meant to be neutral with regard to particular religions; it does not discriminate against Muslims, for example, but sees religion as such as potentially dangerous. Any time disagreements are ratcheted up to a cosmic level, there is the danger of blood being spilled. For that reason, the Western liberal ideal has insisted on the domestic separation of church, synagogue, mosque, and so on from state, and the privatization of religion. And it has generally insisted that foreign policy promote this ideal in non-Western countries whenever possible.

The notion that people kill in the name of God is undeniable. Arguments that try to pin all violence on other factors—economic deprivation or political marginalization—are easily refuted by the terrorists’ own words; they also assume a clear distinction between religious and political and economic factors that is impossible, even in theory, to pull off, as I will argue below. Nor does it work, despite frequent attempts, to claim that the Crusaders

were not really Christians or Islamic terrorists are not really Muslims. Normatively, it is important for Christians and Muslims to claim that Crusaders and terrorists have gotten the message of Christianity and Islam all wrong. Descriptively, however, it is disingenuous for Christians and Muslims to absolve their own group from wrongdoing by disowning their bad co-

religionists. We must do penance collectively for our collective sins.

People can and do commit violence in the name of God. But obviously people kill for all sorts of other things too. Behind the common tale of religion and violence, therefore, there must be a stronger claim: religion has a *greater* propensity to promote violence than what is not religion. What is not

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**Religion is claimed to be incendiary because it allows reason to be trumped by passion. Arguments that religion foments violence come in three types: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, and religion is non-rational.**

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religion is called “secular.” The idea that religion promotes violence depends entirely on this distinction between the religious and the secular.

### **UNSTABLE CATEGORIES**

Imagine a table with two columns, religious and secular, and a line separating the two. In the “religious” column are generally included Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and a few other “world religions.” Under “secular” we find non-religious categories of human life such as politics and economics, as well as ideologies and practices like nationalism, atheism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism that might fall under such non-religious categories. The common notion that religion is peculiarly prone to violence depends on the idea that these secular matters have less of a tendency to promote violence; it is commonly assumed that this is so because they have to do with purely mundane affairs. Religion, on the other hand, is seen as peculiarly incendiary because it raises the stakes to another level, where reason is trumped by passion. In examining academic arguments that religion foments violence, I have found that such arguments can be grouped into three types: religion is absolutist, religion is divisive, and religion is non-rational.<sup>1</sup>

Such arguments seem undeniable, to most of us living in liberal Western social orders, anyway. Terrorism, mostly of the Islamist kind, comes immediately to mind as confirmation. If we cast a glance over the extraordinarily bloody last hundred years or so, however, complicating evidence presses itself upon us. World War I, to which nationalism is generally assigned as primary cause, resulted in 38 million military and civilian casualties. Deaths

under Marxist regimes are estimated in figures that range as high as 110 million. The death toll under the three regimes alone of Stalin, Mao, and the Khmer Rouge ranges from a low of 21 million to a high of 70 million; all were militantly atheist. The last hundred years have seen frequent war waged for oil, land, flags, free markets, democracy, ethnicity, and a host of other “secular” causes. What becomes of the idea that religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence in the face of this evidence?

For some religion-and-violence theorists, the answer to this problem is simple: move the offending ideologies over the line to the other side of the table. Atheist Christopher Hitchens takes this approach in his bestselling book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Totalitarianism, he says, is essentially religious. According to Hitchens, “the object of perfecting the species – which is the very root and source of the totalitarian impulse – is in essence a religious one.”<sup>2</sup> Even when they try to extirpate religion, totalitarian regimes show themselves to be religious. “All that the totalitarians have demonstrated is that the religious impulse – the need to worship – can take even more monstrous forms if it is repressed.”<sup>3</sup> Thus do atheists like Stalin and Kim Jong-il find themselves – undoubtedly to their great surprise – on the side of religion. Hitchens is not alone in this move. Political scientist Rudolph Rummel – relentless chronicler of communist tyranny and promoter of the theory that democratic regimes are essentially peaceful – counts Marxism as the bloodiest of all religions.<sup>4</sup> Religion is violent because it is *defined* as violent. Religion poisons everything because everything poisonous is labeled “religious.”

For other religion-and-violence theorists, secular ideologies are not moved as a whole to the religious side of the table, but whatever is violent about them is attributed to religion. Take for example political scientist David Rapoport’s comments on nationalism and religion. One element in its disposition toward violence

is the capacity of religion to inspire total loyalties or commitments, and in this respect, it is difficult to imagine anything which surpasses the religious community. Religion has often had formidable rivals; in the modern world the nation sometimes has surpassed religion as a focus of loyalties, though significantly there is increasing propensity for academics to speak of ‘civic religion’ when discussing national symbols and rites. In any case, the ascendancy of the nation has occupied but a brief moment in history so far, and in a limited portion of the world – all of which only more underscores the durability and special significance of religion.<sup>5</sup>

Here nationalism is not a religion, but it acts like a religion and is sometimes called a religion, and the violence of nationalism counts as evidence for the violence of religion. Another reason that religion is peculiarly linked to violence, according to Rapoport, is that it uses violent language. He illustrates

this point by giving examples of explicitly secular movements that have appropriated religious language in the service of violence. He quotes the secularist Abraham Stern:

Like my father who taught me to read in Torah  
I will teach my pupils; stand to arms, kneel and shoot  
Because there is a religion of redemption – a religion of the war of  
liberation  
Whoever accepts it – be blessed: whoever denies it – be cursed.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of concluding that “secular” liberation movements can inspire just as much passion and commitment and violence as “religious” movements can – or that the Stern Gang was, as Stern himself acknowledged, dedicated to a kind of “religion,” which throws the whole religious/secular distinction into question – Rapoport offers Stern’s poem as evidence that *religion* has a disposition towards violence. As with nationalism, here secular terrorism acts like a religion and is called a religion, but is not religious, even though it counts as evidence of religion’s violent tendencies.

The argument that religion has a peculiar disposition toward violence depends upon a sharp dividing line between the religious and the secular, but religion-and-violence arguments engage in frequent smuggling across that border. Political theorist Bhikhu Parekh issues a blistering indictment of religion: “It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth.”<sup>7</sup> Parekh confesses, however, that

several secular ideologies, such as some varieties of Marxism, conservatism, and even liberalism have a quasi-religious orientation and form, and conversely formally religious languages sometimes have a secular content, so that the dividing line between a secular and a religious language is sometimes difficult to draw.<sup>8</sup>

Violent and irrational impulses are popping up everywhere, even in liberalism, which inspires the creation of the category “quasi-religious” to try to corral them all back onto religion’s side. Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer has made a career out of exploring the peculiar tendency of religion to contribute to violence, but the whole project seems to fall into confusion when he states flatly that “secular nationalism is ‘a religion’”<sup>9</sup> and even that “the secular is a sort of advanced form of religion.”<sup>10</sup> What becomes of the dividing line between “secular” and “religious” – upon which the whole argument depends – if the secular is a form of religion?

Some religion-and-violence theorists deal with the problem here by openly and consistently expanding the category of “religion.” Richard Wentz’s book *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* includes not only Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and the like, but also consumerism, secular humanism, football fanaticism, faith in technology, and a host of other

ideologies and practices under the rubric “religion.” He concludes, “Perhaps all of us do bad things in the name of (or as a representative of) religion.”<sup>11</sup> Wentz has intuited correctly that people do violence for all sorts of reasons. Where he goes wrong is in thinking that he can obliterate the line between religious and secular and still end up blaming violence on religion. Instead of an argument for why religion has a greater tendency than the secular to promote violence, Wentz has simply taken everything for which people do violence and labeled it “religion.”

Religion-and-violence arguments are rife with this kind of nonsense because they depend upon a stable dividing line between religious and secular that does not exist. The distinction between religious and secular is always in flux. It is a modern and Western distinction, a line socially constructed in different ways for different purposes, and not simply a feature of the way things are. Religion-and-violence theorists construct the distinction for their own purposes, to condemn certain things and ignore others. A brief history of the distinction shows that this has always been the case.

### **HISTORY OF THE DISTINCTION**

Once there was no religious/secular distinction. Wilfred Cantwell Smith went looking for an equivalent concept to “religion” in ancient Greece, Egypt, India, China, and Japan, and found none.<sup>12</sup> The Romans had the term *religio*, but as Augustine writes in *The City of God*, the “normal meaning” of the term was “an attitude of respect in

relations between a man and his neighbor.”<sup>13</sup> This attitude is something we would consider to be “secular.” In Roman society, obligations and devotion to civic duties, gods, friends, family, and civil authorities were all bound in a web of relations. There was no religion/politics distinction; how could there be when Caesar was a god? When the religious/secular distinction is introduced to Western society in

the medieval period, it is primarily used to denote a distinction between two types of priests, those who are part of an order and those “secular” priests who belong to a diocese. There was no realm of purely secular and mundane affairs to which Christianity was indifferent or peripheral, and though there was a distinction between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the religion/politics distinction would have to await the modern era.

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**Religion-and-violence arguments depend upon a stable divide between religious and secular that does not exist. It is a modern and Western distinction, a line socially constructed to condemn certain things and ignore others.**

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Timothy Fitzgerald finds no evidence in English of a religious/secular distinction in the way we use it now until the late seventeenth century. The religion/politics distinction is even later.<sup>14</sup> These distinctions first appear in the writings of figures like John Locke and William Penn. To make a long and complex story brief and simple, the distinction is the result of the struggle between ecclesiastical and civil authorities for power in early modern

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**In domestic matters, the myth of religious violence is used to exclude certain practices from the public sphere. In foreign policy, it is used to justify attitudes and actions towards non-secular social orders, especially Muslim ones.**

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Europe.<sup>15</sup> The new territorial states arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in part by appropriating powers formerly in the hands of the church; ecclesiastical courts were abolished, and the rights to nominate bishops and abbots, control over church revenues, monopoly on the means of violence, and the primary allegiance of the people were trans-

ferred to the nascent state. The first use of the term “secularization” was to indicate the transfer of property from ecclesiastical to civil control. Under these circumstances, the religion/secular and religion/politics divides were invented to exclude ecclesiastical authority from certain types of public power. Religion, as it became in Locke’s writings, was invented as a universal and essentially interior impulse, completely distinct from the mundane business of politics and economics. The church would henceforth be confined to the ambit of religion.

Once the religious/secular distinction was created in the West, it was subsequently exported to the rest of the world in the process of colonization. In their first encounters with the natives, Western explorers reported back home with remarkable consistency that the natives had no religion at all.<sup>16</sup> Once they colonized the natives, however, the religious/secular distinction was found quite useful. Western scholars began to fit the locals’ cultural systems – even those without gods, like Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism – into taxonomies of “world religions,” despite resistance from native elites. Chinese elites in the late nineteenth century, for example, rejected the idea that Confucianism was a religion, because religion was seen to be otherworldly and individualistic.<sup>17</sup> Hindu nationalists today “refuse to call Hinduism a religion precisely because they want to emphasize that Hinduism is more than mere internalized beliefs. It is social, political, economic, and familial in nature. Only thus can India the secular state become interchangeable with India the Hindu homeland.”<sup>18</sup> The religious/secular distinction, nevertheless, was imposed on colonized peoples in large part because it facilitated the quarantining of the local culture to the private



sphere of “religion.” In the case of India, to make Hinduism a religion was to take everything it meant to be Indian and confine it to a non-public sphere; to be public meant to be British.

### **THE DISTINCTION AS AN ACT OF POWER**

The point of this very brief history is to show that the religious/secular distinction upon which the common notion that religion promotes violence depends is an invented, contingent, and ever-shifting distinction, not simply a part of the way things are. Where the line gets drawn between religious and secular is, furthermore, dependent on what kinds of power one wants to authorize and what kinds one wants to exclude. This becomes especially apparent if we examine how the myth of religious violence is used today.

In domestic matters, the myth of religious violence is used to exclude certain kinds of practices from the public sphere. Until 1940 the Supreme Court invoked “religion” as a unifying force in American society. Since 1940, however, the Supreme Court has repeatedly raised the specter of religious violence in banning school prayer, banning optional religious education from public school buildings, banning public aid to religious schools, and so on. When the Supreme Court invoked the danger of religious conflict in *Aguilar v. Felton* (1985) to ban nonsectarian remedial education for low-income kids from taking place in parochial schools, Justices O’Connor and Rehnquist dissented, writing, “There is little record support for the proposition that New York City’s admirable Title I program has ignited any controversy other than this litigation.”<sup>19</sup> This dissent highlights the fact that these Supreme Court decisions are not based on any evidence of actual religious violence in American life. The period after 1940 saw interdenominational strife in the U.S. at historical lows; the use of the myth of religious violence has not been a response to empirical fact as much as it has been a useful narrative that has been produced by and has helped produce consent to the increasing secularization of the American social order.

In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence has been used to justify attitudes and actions towards non-secular social orders, especially Muslim ones. We assume that the reason for turmoil in the Middle East is religion. Muslims have not learned to separate mosque from state, religion from politics, and so the passions of religion continue to wreak havoc in the public sphere. Our foreign policy is geared toward moving them—by force, if necessary—toward liberal, Western style democracy, which is the key to peace. The Iraq War was meant to bring the blessings of liberalism to the Middle East. And so the myth of religious violence becomes a justification for war on behalf of secularism. There are many subtle versions of this secularist argument for military intervention; here is a blunt version by bestselling New Atheist author Sam Harris:

Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary

claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion, while inspiring them to commit acts of extraordinary violence against others. There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense. This is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, at an even greater cost to ourselves and innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world. We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As this quote from Harris makes clear, people kill for all sorts of things. People are just as capable of killing for atheism or secularism as they are of killing for gods. The attempt to come to general conclusions about violent behavior is not illuminated but confused and obscured by trying to divide “religious” from “secular” ideologies and practices. Devotion to so-called “secular” ideologies and practices can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as devotion to so-called “religions.”

The idea that “religion” is peculiarly prone to violence is not based in empirical fact, but is an ideological justification for the dominance of secular social orders, orders that can and do inspire violence. The myth of religious violence causes us to turn a blind eye to the causes of non-Western grievances against the Western world. We reduce the cause of Muslim anger at the West to their “religion,” thus casting a convenient fog of amnesia over Western aggressions on behalf of Western interests: the 1953 overthrow of a democratic government in Iran, support for corrupt and tyrannical governments in the Muslim world, the plundering of Arab countries’ oil riches, the Iraq War, support for Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, Abu Ghraib, “extraordinary rendition,” and the rest of it.

Doing away with the myth of religious violence helps level the playing field: let’s examine the violence fomented by ideologies of all kinds, including those we tend to regard as “secular” and therefore benign. Instead of dividing the world *a priori* into reasonable people (us) and irrational people (them), we can perhaps promote peace by doing away with such binaries.

## NOTES

1 I examine nine such arguments in the first chapter of my book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 232.

3 *Ibid.*, 247.

4 Rudolph J. Rummel, "The Killing Machine that Is Marxism," *World Net Daily* (December 15, 2004), [www.wnd.com/2004/12/28036/](http://www.wnd.com/2004/12/28036/) (accessed January 29, 2016).

5 David C. Rapoport, "Some General Observations on Religion and Violence," in Mark Juergensmeyer, ed., *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1992), 120.

6 *Ibid.*, 121.

7 Bhikhu Parekh, "The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse," in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Religion, Politics, and Peace* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 72.

8 *Ibid.*, 74.

9 Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 15.

10 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 23.

11 Richard E. Wentz, *Why People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 37.

12 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 54-55.

13 Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), X.1 (373).

14 Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

15 I tell the story in much greater detail in chapter two of *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

16 See David Chidester, "Colonialism," in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 427-428.

17 Peter Beyer, "Defining Religion in Cross-National Perspective: Identity and Difference in Official Conceptions," in Arthur L. Greil and David G. Bromley, eds., *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and the Secular* (Oxford: JAI, 2003), 174-180.

18 Richard S. Cohen, "Why Study Indian Buddhism?" in Derek R. Peterson and Darren R. Walhof, eds., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 27.

19 Sandra Day O'Connor and William Rehnquist in *Aguilar v. Felton*, 473 U.S. 402 (1985), 429.

20 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 52-53.



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# The End of Scapegoating

BY S . MARK HEIM

**The cross can only be understood in light of a prototypical pattern of violence in human culture: scapegoating sacrifice. The biblical tradition and the passion accounts are themselves momentous steps in bringing that pattern to light, and rejecting it.**

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Violence is lodged at the center of the Christian gospel, in the crucifixion of Jesus. Does this mean that violence is likewise intrinsic *to* that gospel, accepted as a necessary part of the path of salvation or at best sublimated as a symbolic spiritual image of forgiveness and reconciliation? In some Christian theologies, a focus on a “heavenly,” transactional meaning of the cross is reinforced by an inability to see any earthly revelatory value in Jesus’ death. Jesus’ insistence on walking the path to Calvary seems unconnected with the specific dynamics of his brutal execution. By contrast, modern critiques of Christian atonement theology, inside or outside the Church, focus overwhelmingly on its role in inciting or condoning violence in worldly interpersonal and intrapersonal realms. They object that the core pattern of the gospel encourages Christian anti-Semitism (by endorsing the deicide charge), nurtures passivity in the face of oppression (by exhorting victims to accept their lot as Jesus did), exalts a religious masochism (by suggesting the highest reaches of spiritual attainment require pain), and deforms our understanding of God (by making God a cruel model demanding innocent blood for restitution).<sup>1</sup>

René Girard’s work dramatically reshapes this picture, emphasizing the relevance of the cross precisely at the points most at issue.<sup>2</sup> He argues there is already an intrinsic anthropological significance to Jesus’ death that is given in the passion narratives’ empirical account of its occurrence. These accounts also contain an explicit counter-sacrificial theology built on that descriptive ground. According to the first, the cross is scapegoating sacri-

fice, and the revelation is that it is known as such. According to the second, the cross is God's identification with the victims of such violence, and resurrection is an overturning of its legitimacy, a definitive severing of the sacred from sacred violence. Girard audaciously challenges those in the humanistic sciences to reconsider the cross as a source of empirical insight.<sup>3</sup> He challenges theologians to embrace the descriptive unity of Jesus' death with numberless others.<sup>4</sup>

This is the crucial reference point for the wider meanings theologians may rightly find in the passion. In other words, the reconciliation of God with humanity is of one piece with God's costly engagement to rescue us from our entanglement in violence and self-deception. From this perspective, the many criticisms of atonement theology have things exactly reversed. The care for victims that funds these critiques is effectively grounded in the cross and its visible victim, however theology may have lost track of the connection. The cross can only be understood in light of a prototypical pattern of violence in human culture: scapegoating sacrifice. And the biblical tradition and the passion accounts are themselves momentous steps in bringing that pattern to light.

#### **HOW THE PATTERN OF SCAPEGOATING BEGINS**

In brief, the story of scapegoating sacrifice is this. Particularly in its infancy, social life is a fragile shoot, fatally subject to plagues of rivalry and vengeance. In the absence of law or government, escalating cycles of retaliation are the original social disease. Without finding a way to treat it, human society can hardly begin. The means to break this vicious cycle appear as if miraculously. At some point, when feud threatens to dissolve a community, spontaneous and irrational mob violence erupts against some distinctive person or minority in the group. They are accused of the worst crimes the group can imagine, crimes that by their very enormity might have caused the terrible plight the community now experiences. They are lynched.

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**Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and our politics. It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises.**

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The sad good in this bad thing is that it actually works. In the train of the murder, communities find that this sudden war of all against one has delivered them from the war of each against all. The sacrifice of one person as a scapegoat discharges the pending acts of retribution. It "clears the air."

The sudden peace confirms the desperate charges that the victim had been behind the crisis to begin with. If the scapegoat's death is the solution, the scapegoat must have been the cause. The death has such reconciling effect, that it seems the victim must possess supernatural power. So the victim becomes a criminal, a god, or both, memorialized in myth.<sup>5</sup>

Rituals of sacrifice originated in this way, as tools to fend off social crisis. And in varied forms they are with us still. The prescription is that divisions in the community must be reduced to but one division, the division of all against one common victim or one minority group. Prime candidates are the marginal and the weak, or those isolated by their very prominence. Typically, they will be charged with violating the community's most extreme taboos. The process does not just accept innocent victims, it prefers them: outsiders with no friends or defenders. This, in a nutshell, is Girard's account of the origin of religion. It is identical with the beginning of culture itself, for without some such mechanism to head off "tit for tat" conflict, human society could not get off the ground. This is the genetic flaw in our normal approaches to peacemaking, the "good" violence against them that drives out bad violence among us.

No one thought out this process, and its effectiveness depends on a certain blindness to its workings. Myths are stories that reflect the scapegoat event, but do not describe it. They are the legacy of a collective killing that all the perpetrators found completely justified, entirely necessary, and powerfully beneficent. Myth is the memory of a clean conscience that never registered the presence of a victim at all. It can take the form of a creation myth of the world being created out of the body parts of a deity, a traditional story of old women casting spells with an "evil eye," or the wildfire contagion of rumors that Jews caused the plague by poisoning wells. The continuity of consciousness between producers and consumers of a myth, from mouth to mouth or from generation to generation, is precisely the invisibility of the victim as a victim.

### **HOW CHRIST'S DEATH UNDERMINES THE PATTERN**

Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and our politics. It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises. It is most virulent where it is most invisible. So long as we are in the grip of the process, we do not see our victims as scapegoats. Texts that hide scapegoating foster it. Texts that show it for what it is undermine it.

Jesus' willingness to face death, specifically death on a cross, suddenly looks anything but arbitrary, and much more like the "wisdom of God" that the New Testament so surprisingly discovers there. God breaks the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. God is willing to die for us, to bear our sin in this particular way because we desperately need deliverance from this particular sin.

Jesus does not volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteers to get into ours. Jesus' persecutors intend his death to bring peace, to avoid an outbreak of violence between Romans and Israelites, between Jews and other Jews. Jesus' accusers intend his death to be sacrificial business as usual. But God means it to be the opposite.

The Bible is frequently criticized for exhibiting so much violence in its narratives. To Girard, this is extremely ironic. Truly mythical texts are rooted in sacrificial violence, prescribe it, and shield us from awareness of our complicity in it. That is why they do not show it directly. The Bible makes violence visible, and therefore makes its victims uncomfortably visible too. The language of sacrifice and blood (with all its dangers) is there to tell the truth. To wish to avert our eyes reflects a naïve confidence that we are in greater danger of being corrupted by the language than of falling prey to the sin it describes. The sensitivity to victims so often now turned against the Bible is itself rooted there. We would not accuse the Gospels of victimization if we had not already been converted by them.

To Girard, this theme is a continuous thread in the Bible. An awareness and rejection of the sacrificial mechanism is already set forth in Hebrew scripture. The averted sacrifice of Isaac; the Joseph story; the prophets' condemnation of scapegoating the widow, the weak, or the foreigner; the complaints of Job against false accusations; and the Psalms' obsession with the innocent victim of collective violence—like the passion narratives' transparent account of Jesus' death, all these point in the same direction. They reveal the "victimage" mechanisms at the joint root of religion and society, and reject them.

The workings of mythical sacrifice require that in human society generally "they know not what they do." But in the Gospels the process is laid out in stark clarity. Jesus says these very words from the cross. The scapegoat is revealed as a scapegoat (Luke's centurion

confesses at the moment of Jesus' death, "Surely this man was innocent"). When Girard came to the Gospels after his work on violence and the sacred in anthropology, he found there all the classic elements his sacrificial theory had come to expect in myths: the crowd coalescing against an individual, antagonists like Herod and Pilate making common cause, accusations of the greatest crimes and impurities. But he was startled to recognize that

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**God breaks the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a scapegoat victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. Jesus does not volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteers to get into ours.**

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the reality of what was happening was explicit, not hidden. This time the story was not told in the terms of the mob but from the point of view of the victim, who is unmistakably visible as unjustly accused and wrongly killed. The scapegoating process is stripped of its sacred mystery. And the collective persecution and abandonment are painfully illustrated, so that no one, including the disciples, the proto-Christians, can honestly say afterwards that they resisted the sacrificial tide.

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**The Church, as a new community formed through identification with the crucified one, is dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice.**

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Seen from this perspective, Christ's somewhat enigmatic actions make complete sense. To resist victimization by means of counter-violence would simply stoke the proliferation of violence sacrifice seeks to contain, and intensify the search for more and better victims. On the other hand, to submit passively to the sacrificial mechanism would do nothing to change it; rather, that would only

smooth the way for future victims and condemn them to invisibility. Such is the dilemma posed by this malignant wisdom we seem doomed to serve whichever way we turn. Humanity is caught in this bondage, caught without even being able to name it directly.

God steps into this double bind and overcomes it. No ordinary victim can change this process, can uncover what is obscured in the constant practice of scapegoating. Redemptive violence—the sort of violence that claims to be for the good of many, to be sacred, to be the mysterious ground of human life itself—always purports to be the means of overcoming sin (removing pollution, punishing the transgressor who has brought disaster on the community). The sin it characteristically claims to overcome is the offense of the scapegoat, the crime the victim has committed. But in the passion accounts the sin in view is that of the persecutors. It is not the sin of the one which jeopardizes the many, but the sin of the many against the one. In the passion narratives, redemptive violence stands forth plainly and unequivocally as itself the sin that needs to be overcome.

Any human being can be plausibly scapegoated and no human can prevail when the collective community turns against her. Nor is it sufficient to simply instruct us about our situation, for we are all too fully enclosed in the scapegoating process to be able to break the spell. It is virtually miraculous to become aware of our own actions as scapegoating. It is an extraordinary step even to arrive at the awareness of our susceptibility to that dynamic



that is expressed by the disciples at the Last Supper. When Jesus predicts his own betrayal, they piteously ask him, "Is it I, Lord?" A hard-headed reader would object that at this late date they ought to know if they are going to do it or not. But they have understood enough to know that they cannot be sure. They are not exempt. When the cock crows the third time for Peter, it crows for us, to state the truth that when we become part of a mob, we too will likely be the last to know.

Christ died for us. He did so first in the mythic, sacrificial sense that all scapegoated victims do. That we know this is already a sign that he died for us in a second sense, to save us from that very sin. Jesus dies in our place, because it is literally true that any one of us, in the right circumstances, can be the scapegoat. As the letter to the Hebrews says, Christ is a sacrifice to end sacrifice, who has died once for all. Christ's purpose was not

to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

*Hebrews 9:25-26*

The work of the cross is the work of a transcendent God, breaking into a cycle we could not change alone. If we limit Jesus' work to that of a human exemplar—a task to be repeated, then the crucifixion becomes more of a prescription for suffering than if we grasp it as the work of the incarnate one, once for all.

Is Christ's death unique? It is not unique at all in that scapegoating deaths like his happen constantly. That very identification is crucial to understand what is unique about it, the distinctive way in which it makes *them* visible and opposes their repetition. It is the one of these deaths that have been happening since the foundation of the world that most irreversibly cracks that foundation. Christian "exclusivism" about Jesus' death is of this sort. To believe in the crucified one is to want no other victims. To depend on the blood of Jesus is to refuse to depend on the sacrificial blood of anyone else. It is to swear off scapegoats.

### **HOW THE REDEEMED COMMUNITY BEHAVES**

When mythical sacrifice succeeds, peace temporarily descends, true memory is erased and the way is smoothed for the next scapegoat. But in the case of Jesus' death, neither does everyone unanimously close ranks over Jesus' grave (as his executioners hope) nor is there a spree of violent revenge on behalf of the crucified leader. Instead, an odd new counter-community arises, dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life through him that requires no further such sacrifice. One of the crucial things that makes the Church a new

community is its constitution in solidarity not *against* some sacrificial victim, but by identification with the crucified one. The moment we point a finger at some “they” as Jesus’ killers, we have enacted the sin that the very particularity of the cross meant to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

The pattern of the cross has a great native power to interrupt our patterns of violence. When we locate ourselves by reference to Jesus, it is hard not to see our location to our victims. Sister Helen Prejean started her ministry with death row inmates and what became a national campaign around a simple identification. Jesus was a death row inmate, a condemned one of his society, and so were these people. Harriet Beecher Stowe turned abolitionism from a fringe political passion to a flood tide by writing a book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. That book made one relentless juxtaposition, between the plight of a slave being beaten to death and the plight of the scourged Jesus. A U.S. military guard at Abu Ghraib prison was moved to rise in opposition to the abuse there by one image she could not erase from her mind: a prisoner shackled in the likeness of a body on a cross. Marc Chagall’s famous painting, *White Crucifixion*, addressed the holocaust with an unforgettable image of a prayer shawl-clad Jesus on a cross, floating over scenes of pogroms and burning synagogues. To identify those in the place of Jesus is to know that we ought not to be in the mob against them.

It is not enough to simply recognize the existence of the sacrificial dynamic. We need to see its application in our own situation. We need a substitute, a way to overcome conflict in our communities without resort to sacrifice. This is actually the great venture the Church is engaged in every time it gathers at the communion table. When Christians come there, they meet the unequivocal reminder of Christ’s bloody death, of the blindness and abandonment of the disciples. And when we hear “Do *this* in remembrance of me,” we hear the implied contrast. Do this *instead* of offering new victims. Unlike the mythic figures who hid past actual bodies and modeled future sacrifices, Christ is not to be remembered with scapegoating, with taking or being new victims. “This” is a humble meal and prayer, not a new cross. Following that example, Christians undertake the hope that this meal of the new community may accomplish the peace that sacrificial violence could, and more. In it, we recall a real sacrifice and practice a substitutionary atonement. On that table, bread and wine are to be continually substituted for victims, substituted for any, and all, of us.

## NOTES

1 On such criticisms see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).

2 For an overview of Girard’s work, see René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

3 See S. Mark Heim, “In What Way Is Christ’s Death a Sacrifice? Theories of Sacrifice

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and Theologies of the Cross," in Carrie Ann Murray, ed., *Diversity of Sacrifice: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond*, The Institute for European and Mediterranean Archeology Distinguished Monograph Series (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016).

4 In this vein it is striking that liberation theologians have taken particular interest in Girard's work, seeing in it a new type of social analysis relevant to their concerns, one drawn from the heart of Scripture. See the materials from a consultation of Latin American liberation theologians with Girard in Hugo Assmann, ed., *Götzenbilder und Opfer: René Girard im Gespräch mit der Befreiungstheologie* (Münster, DEU: LIT Verlag, 1996).

5 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

6 This is why the rejection of anti-Semitism is the infallible test for a healthy atonement theory. See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 209-212.

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# Reflections on Christian Courage

BY CANDACE VOGLER

**The kind of courage that Christians living in relatively secure circumstances are likely to need these days is courage in honoring moral prohibitions. Certain kinds of acts are simply prohibited, regardless of the consequences that anyone might hope to gain by doing them.**

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**I**n the early church, being called to Christ often meant being prepared to suffer for one's faith. It is no accident that the Greek term "martyr" meant *to witness*, and early Christian witness was perilous. This sort of suffering is anticipated in Scripture. For instance, the Apostle Paul writes, "For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (Philippians 1:29). And in the Gospels, Jesus warns his disciples, "But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name" (Luke 21:16-17), and explains, "they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me" (John 15:21).<sup>1</sup>

In many parts of the world again today Christians can find themselves facing persecution of kinds familiar from the early church, and we pray for their preservation and for God to be with them in the trials they face. But in the relative security and safety we take for granted in places like the United States, Christians are less likely to face rape, murder, mutilation, and the like because of their faith. What we face, no matter how unlikely it is that we will lose our lives or health or families if we stand firm, is a different sort of challenge—a sort that the world handles in one way, and that our faith should allow us to handle in a very different way. It is a challenge that arises at the intersection of justice and faith, not unrelated to the challenge

of being steadfast in one's faith in the face of actual or threatened persecution: the challenge to respect moral prohibitions.

G. E. M. Anscombe describes the recent shift in thinking that raises this particular challenge. It has long been a hallmark of "the Hebrew-Christian ethic," she notes, "that there are certain things forbidden whatever [the] consequences" we might hope to gain by doing them — things like intentionally killing the innocent in order to achieve some other good, embracing idolatry, committing adultery, falsely professing faith in God, and so on. Yet a number of modern thinkers invite us to be skeptical of such proscriptions, and instead let the consequences — that is, the good things we might achieve or the evil ones we might avoid — be our guide in moral affairs. Nothing is absolutely wrong, according to this sort of "consequentialism," if the outcome is positive enough; indeed, among these thinkers it "is pretty well taken for obvious...that a prohibition such as that on murder does not operate in face of some consequences." This is a quite remarkable turn in thinking, Anscombe observes, because "of course the strictness of the prohibition has as its point *that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences.*"<sup>2</sup>

### **MORAL PROHIBITION**

The special character of respect for moral prohibitions is enshrined in ordinary practical reason (whether or not the rational being in question is a Christian). Respect for moral prohibitions is built into an orientation to the future that has it that good acts are supposed to bring good. In other words, any bad that follows a genuinely good act (which is to say, a good sort of thing to do that is done in a good way, under appropriate circumstances, with respect to appropriate other people, and so on) is supposed to be an *accident*, whereas the good that comes of good acts is foreseeable, even if we do not specifically foresee that good. Our respect operates with an implicit sense that good is supposed to come of good, and that this good could be incalculably greater than any good we can sense or see or envision when we are trying to pursue some good or ward off some bad here and now. I sometimes think of it as the *It's a Wonderful Life* principle — George Bailey of Bedford Falls discovered that had he not made many sacrifices, small and large, in the course of living his life, the entire community would have been a very different place. He planted seeds of goodness in a way that grew over the years without his ever imagining the ramifications of his many decisions to act for others' sake rather than for his own advantage.<sup>3</sup>

Like many basic principles of practical reason, this one has a flip side. It goes like this: all bets are off when people do things they know to be bad. Any bad that comes of a bad act, however unexpected, is no accident. Moral prohibitions attach to kinds of acts that are always bad and never good, always wrong and never right. Traditionally, acts of murder and rape fall under this category. "Genocide" is the name of a collective action that was invented precisely in order to mark a kind of act that is always wrong,

always bad. These acts are acts that are wrong or bad just because of the kinds of acts that they are.

There is room for reasonable disagreement about whether most things we might do or avoid doing on purpose will be good or bad under the circumstances, but where morally prohibited kinds of act are concerned, there is not room for doubt. If you like, the handful of kinds of acts that are morally

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**There can be no question of doing morally prohibited kinds of acts at the right time or in the right way. These acts are never to be done. Any good that comes of them is entirely accidental. It is not in the nature of such acts to seed goodness.**

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prohibited mark points on a boundary surrounding the much larger field of kinds of acts that are sometimes good, sometimes bad.

Respecting moral prohibitions requires (at the very least) avoiding committing acts of prohibited kinds. But beyond simply managing to avoid committing acts of murder or rape or genocide (or, I think, of torture) — a thing I hope will present no great challenge to people generally — we may also be called upon to intervene in

order to prevent others from doing such things (when we have a chance to do so directly), or, at the very least, to raise a protest against such acts. The kind of courage that Christians living in relatively secure circumstances are likely to need these days is courage in honoring moral prohibitions. Honoring moral prohibitions requires operating explicitly in a practical framework that expects good to come of good, and that refuses to do wicked things calculating that bad deeds will stave off catastrophe or else bring about some sort of excellent outcome.

Now, you may well ask, why on earth would Christians think that good should come of good? Do we just have some funny, sweet, sentimental attachment to the idea that good ought to be amplified by still more good? I don't think so. Actually, I think that this sort of orientation to the future is built into human reason in a perfectly general way, but that Christian faith — rooted in Judaic tradition — gives us actual *grounds* for the orientation.

In effect, because we understand that we have a just and perfectly loving Creator, we can know that any badness that comes of genuinely good acts is an accident. We don't do good expecting bad, even if we can foresee some bad coming of good. By exactly the same token, any good that comes of a bad act is an accident — we cannot do wicked deeds and expect good to come of them. How does our understanding of our Creator give us grounds for this conviction?

For starters, we know that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). In short, we know that evil is supposed to come of evil. More specifically, we know that some kinds of acts are, by their very nature, evil. We can spot these things in part through the amount of human attention and effort given over to figuring out which acts are instances of these kinds. Think, for example, of the amount of attention that has been paid to determining what acts will count as instances of rape or of murder or of genocide. We have an obvious case of genocide if my people round up your people and murder the lot of you. But we may also have a genocide in progress if, instead, my people take your children away, feed, clothe, and educate them, but do not permit them to speak your language, practice your religion, learn your customs, or learn the history of your people. By preventing your next generation from carrying your culture forward, my people can put an end to your people. With morally prohibited kinds of acts, there can be no question of doing the thing at the right time or in the right way. These are acts that are never to be done. An alternative way of expressing what I take to be the same point is that any good that comes of such acts is entirely accidental. It is not in the nature of such acts to seed goodness.

That we are in *any* position to expect amplified good to come of the good that we try to do is, I think, a quiet whisper of grace in our very ordinary way of reckoning what will happen if we act well. The whisper is always there to be heard, even though we may only feel the force of its voice when we think about things that should *not* happen and should *never* have happened to people struggling to lead upright and good lives in the face of every worldly pressure to do otherwise. This idea that some bad things should not happen is nothing that finds its support in our experience of the natural world. In the natural world, whatever happens is just what happens. There is no room for thoughts about what *should* or *should not* happen in physics or chemistry. There are unexpected events, but an unexpected event is just that—a surprise. *Unexpected* is not the same as *wrong*. The mere fact that we are surprised by a natural event does not even begin to suggest that the natural event ought not to have happened. When we think that bad things should not happen to people struggling to lead good lives, we are not making a prediction. We are trafficking in a very different way of orienting ourselves to the future. This different orientation, I take it, is the rational basis for Christian moral courage, the thing that we can hold onto when our faith is tested in ways large and small.

## **CHRISTIAN COURAGE**

Traditional Christian thought has it that grace supplies more than this rational basis for us when our faith is severely tested. However well or badly we have done cultivating a virtuous character, grace can bring us special strengths (and the Holy Spirit can provide special gifts) to help us when we are in desperate need. It is obvious that we are likely to need such assistance

when we find ourselves facing death for the sake of our faith (provided that we have not run out *seeking* such a situation — foolishness is not a sign of strong faith, and Christian courage shows itself in fleeing when wisdom counsels flight). But we can find ourselves needing to call upon our faith even when the risk we face is much less serious. We can find ourselves needing to stand against inherently bad acts and policies — refusing to do or support a great many things that we know to be wrong — just because we understand that we cannot do or support wicked things in order to bring about something good or stave off something worse. What we need may not be the kind of thing needed to face martyrdom, but we may at least need faith to stiffen our spines in the face of worldly calculation. It is one thing to seek forgiveness of sin when we do wrong and repent of our wrongdoing. It is quite another to sin in the hope that we will save face or make the world a better place through sinning. All too often, worldly calculation sides with the latter.

I mentioned that the world has one way of understanding what is going on when we refuse to side with sin, and that we have a different understanding. The world thinks that we are doing one of two kinds of special calculation (because the world has a strong tendency to try to understand what people do by thinking about calculation).

First calculation: some will think that we are siding with faith because we are afraid that we will go to hell if we don't. Of course, if we believe in hell then we also think it is a circumstance that ought to be avoided. It's not that someone who fears eternal damnation has the wrong idea about eternal damnation. But this sort of calculation is at odds with both the rational basis of a Christian orientation to the future and the support we have from grace. The rational basis has it that any good that comes of sin is an accident. We get no credit for some good thing that happens to come about when we sin. Any good that emerges in the wake of a bad act is accidental. The wages of sin is death, not a better world.

The basis in grace is deeply rooted in both faith and love. Our job is to try to walk with Christ as best we can with his help. Christ did *not* sin when sorely tempted to do so. He did not do evil expecting good to come of it. He suffered when this was necessary, and stood firm. His is the example we have for courage as a core component of our faith.

The idea that we might follow Christ's example because we are afraid that we will suffer if we don't misconstrues Christianity at root. This way of reckoning our courage is, to that extent, just wrong.

The second way the world tries to account for Christian courage is by attributing to us a special sort of magical thinking. According to this way of thinking, it's not that cost-benefit calculation is the wrong way to understand Christian courage, it's that Christians think that God is the great cost-benefit guy in the sky. God just alters the payoff structure in such a way that, in the long run — and the long run could stretch to eternity — as a matter of fact, no great good will come of sin, and increasing good will come of



standing firm in our faith. God just arranges events so that good is rewarded and evil is punished. Eventually.

In reply we can say that it's not wrong to think God holds creation in his hands. But trying to account for God's care for creation on the model of some sort of morally loaded, magically balanced cost-benefit system misses the whole force of Christian courage by locating its appeal in the wrong sort of orientation to the future—the merely predictive sort. Again, this way of trying to understand Christian courage flies in the face of both reason and faith.

Reason teaches us that good is supposed to come of good, and that sin is not a wellspring of good. Sin is evil in action. As such, it is to be avoided, even when the world expects good from sin, and great evil from courageous refusal to sin. Faith teaches that our efforts to walk with Christ are efforts to be good human beings; they are efforts to live in such a way that our powers and passions are appropriately governed, we come as close as we can to rectifying our wills, and, as such, we are right with God. Christian courage follows the paths of right reason, appropriate emotion, and proper obedience. It tracks how things are supposed to go, whether or not things go in the way that they are supposed to go. As such, Christian moral courage exemplifies the way that Christians refuse to be drawn into merely predictive calculation in deciding what to do. We know better.

In this, I think, we can sense a lesson from the mysterious writing on the wall in Daniel 5: "*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.*" In the story, Belshazzar adds insult to the injuries done by Nebuchadnezzar, reckoning that good can come of embracing a legacy of injustice in open defiance of God. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar does wrong expecting good to come of it. God's judgment, interpreted by Daniel, uses the idiom of calculation as a condemnation. This can be

read, in part, as a warning against the whole business of relying upon the mode of economic calculation to determine what to do.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, we are charged both with cultivating ordinary practical wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage, and with opening ourselves up to divine help in faith, hope, and charity. We are charged both with developing plain, earthly courage and with orienting ourselves to the specifically Christian mode of standing firm in our faith when the world counsels siding with sin.

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**It is one thing to seek forgiveness of sin when we do wrong and repent of our wrongdoing. It is quite another to sin in the hope that we will save face or make the world a better place through sinning. All too often, worldly calculation sides with the latter.**

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I think that being called to Christ is being called to cultivate good character in the firm knowledge that both faith and reason teach that avoiding sin is crucial to this task, even though no amount of plain good conduct will lead us home to God. Our destination, like our source, is a gift of God.

The orientation to the future that informs Christianity is diametrically opposed to the usual stuff of cost-benefit analysis, even when the cost-benefit mode of determining what will happen next is shored up with some sort of special moral weighting system. It is not that cost-benefit analyses have no place in practical wisdom and right conduct. If I am trying to allocate the financial resources of my firm, for example, then plain economic reasoning may well be what I should employ (provided that the enterprise itself is sound, and I am a just employer). It is rather that cost-benefit analyses are subject to a prior moral order—an order that forbids choosing sin in order to bring about good or avert some other evil. It is that prior moral order, I think, that grounds Christian moral courage.

## NOTES

1 See also, for example, Matthew 5:10; Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 3:16; Philippians 2:8; Hebrews 10:34 and chapter 11; 1 Peter 4:15-16; and Galatians 5:24.

2 G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, 33:124 (January, 1958), 1-19, here citing 10.

3 *It's a Wonderful Life*, motion picture, directed by Frank Capra (1946; Liberty Films).

4 There is tremendous controversy over how to interpret the writing on the wall. I mean my suggestion to be just that—a suggestion that underscores the distance between faith's orientation to the future and plain cost-benefit calculation.



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# Recovering from Moral Injury

BY KEITH G. MEADOR  
WILLIAM C. CANTRELL  
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**When combat veterans and others affected by violence suffer moral injury, they can experience personal shame and estrangement from fellow human beings and God. The challenging task of making integrated peace requires faithful, patient, loving participation by communities of faith.**

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**V**iolence is ubiquitous in our culture with variable degrees of consequence for society, interpersonal relationships, and individuals. While the most readily evident consequences of violence are frequently seen in the physical, psychological, and even spiritual wounds of overt victims, these sequelae of violence (particularly the psychological and spiritual) may likewise be experienced by perpetrators or bystanders of violence. Lines of distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders can tragically blur over time, as cycles of violence often lead to individuals inhabiting each of these roles in different capacities. Those engaged in the activities of violence we are pondering are typically sanctioned by institutions or the state to use aggressive force in service to the institutions or state. While these individuals have typically assented to some degree to engaging in such behaviors, this assent can be challenged over the course of time. Prior cognitive assent to participate in violence does not prevent subsequent psychological and spiritual struggle when one's sense of self and identity is challenged by witnessing or participating in actions contrary to one's expectations of self and others. The ensuing distress can be quite severe and multi-faceted in its presentation – sometimes presenting concurrently with posttraumatic stress disorder or other psychiatric problems, and other times

presenting primarily in a more existential fashion. Increasingly, the mental health professionals, faith community leaders, and others concerned with the care of combat veterans and other individuals affected by violence are identifying and narrating this distinctive kind of suffering with a new term: “moral injury.”

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist, and Brett Litz, a psychologist, have been most frequently cited for promoting the construct of moral injury, while a number of others have now joined the conversation.<sup>1</sup> Shay is recognized as first using the phrase “moral injury” in the context of providing psychiatric care for Vietnam veterans. He conceptualized moral injury as having three signature components: (1) a betrayal of what’s right, (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., in the military – a leader), (3) in a high stakes situation.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of betrayal by a leader, such as by the actions of a commanding officer in the military, is a distinctive stipulation of Shay in his definition of moral injury. He derives the construct from combining years of his experience treating Vietnam-era veterans together with depictions of war in Homeric literature. Using his definition, Shay illustrates how the moral failures of leaders can have a lasting substantive impact on those under their command with the potential consequence of moral injury, as was the case in the story of Achilles in the *Iliad* and for many veterans of Vietnam.

In comparison, Litz and his colleagues elucidate moral injury more broadly and with a distinctively more differentiated locus of moral agency. They describe moral injury as the “psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations....”<sup>3</sup> They identify moral injury as personal shame, feelings of estrangement from fellow human beings, and a sense of alienation from God or a spiritual sense of grounding. Moral injury as understood in this way incorporates more directly the potential moral agency of the person suffering. This moral agency can be experienced by individuals not only at the moment of a morally transgressive event but can also be reinterpreted over time, such that behaviors might come to be deemed excessively violent or abusive in retrospect, with acknowledgement of culpability for roles in violence potentially being interpreted differently over time as well.

A persistent sense of accountability for one’s actions, or for not intervening to challenge others when actions are contrary to previously held commitments and values, sets the context for the development of moral injury. Addressing moral injury so conceived is not without hope, but does require a more textured and multi-dimensional engagement than is frequently provided when approaching psychological and emotional struggles within a standard mental health paradigm of diagnosis and medicalized treatment. While comorbid health challenges for persons suffering with moral injury may necessitate thoughtful and well administered mental health care, moral injury – because it is formed and embedded in socio-

cultural contexts—necessitates the engagement of a community that embodies moral commitments and practices in order to provide the most optimal care. Such a community forms the interpretive lens through which sufferers can challenge moral and cognitive dissonance as they examine the story that is now theirs with which to live responsibly. The task of making integrated peace with one's story, without denial, and without excessive indulgence of the chaos precipitating the moral injury, is challenging. It is one that beckons for faithful, patient, loving participation on behalf of communities of faith and practice.

### **ASSIMILATING MORAL WOUNDS IN COMMUNITY**

The development of care for those suffering with moral injury that adequately honors their psychological and moral interpretation necessitates consideration of the communities within which these persons seek to belong and call home after returning from the context of injury. The notions of both “belonging” and “communities” are central to the healing sought by those suffering with moral injury. At the same time, moral injury is frequently grappled with on a highly personal, individual, singular level, as illustrated by one thoughtful young veteran's description of his experience with moral injury:

I cannot quite clearly distinguish the war as something ‘out there’ or in the past—it is like something I own personally. It lives in me. Sometimes I feel condemned not only by my own actions, but by the war as a whole. I do not mean condemned by some cosmic force or condemned by society. I mean that I condemn myself. This is a paradox. Of course the war is a part of me. I cannot avoid it. I cannot escape my experience. And yet who I am rejects what war is—and what I was in the war.<sup>4</sup>

While many members of faith communities may have limited personal familiarity with war and violence whereby to understand veterans' experiences, the determinative factor for veterans' healing may well be the capacities for hospitality embodied within faith communities to welcome those struggling to conduct soul searching, to belong again, and to find integrity for themselves. Warren Kinghorn, psychiatrist and theologian, rightly argues that moral injury should be understood as being “embodied in specific communities with specific contextually formed practices.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, these communities' commitments to hospitality and to caring for one another should imply a welcoming stance toward those suffering with moral injury and their associated physical, psychological, and social struggles.

In Christian communities, the challenge is to ground such understandings of welcoming the wounded and suffering within eucharistically formed practices of hospitality. In gratitude for the great gift of the Eucharist, we can do no other than to invite the wounded and suffering neighbor into a

community of redemption and healing. Such commitments and practices will nurture the ultimate renarration of a story of reconciliation with one's self and finding a place of belonging with integrity. Engagement of this process, while acknowledging the dissonance of violent and injurious experiences, offers an opportunity for a communally mediated and interpreted redemption of moral injury, while avoiding presumptuous denials of the

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**If persons suffering from moral injury appeared at the entrance of our church and confessed guilt and shame for things done or things undone, how would we respond? Are we honest and patient enough to let them share their story?**

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depths of suffering, confusion, and struggle experienced. For many suffering with moral injury, the religious or spiritual commitments of their families or other sociocultural communities of formation were significant developmental determinants of their moral compass. Appreciating how these complex histories of formation and self-understanding contribute to the current worldview of those with moral injury is impor-

tant for offering care to them within faith communities.

One of the great challenges of communities and practitioners of care is the rush to “fix” those deemed to be suffering or the urge to declare someone healed or relieved of their suffering. While these impulses may be well intentioned, they frequently do great damage and show a lack of regard for the ongoing journey of the sufferer. The previously noted young man suffering with moral injury comments that “moral injury is more like a chronic illness than an acute one. It is something like the pain of arthritis or an old, bad knee that someone complains about when it rains.”<sup>6</sup> The Christian community often seeks to proclaim healings of the Easter resurrection without adequately abiding with the brothers and sisters working through their Holy Saturdays — who are beset with an uncertain sense of loss and fear, while sustained by a yearning hope of finding their way home. Such is the experience of many who are struggling with moral injury.

### **ACTIVELY ENGAGING WITH MORAL INJURY IN COMMUNITY**

Although moral injury as a construct has been quite recently introduced into contemporary conversations around war and violence, the experience of one who is morally injured is no doubt as old as the story of Cain and Abel. And just as certainly, individuals with moral injury have for millennia turned to their faith communities and spiritual leaders. The clergy and other members of these communities are well positioned and often the most suit-

able to make significant contributions in the re-integration, care, restoration, and redemption of those whose lives have been affected by violence and moral injury. This complicated injury that reaches into the depth of one's being can cast doubt, distrust, guilt, and shame, making it potentially very difficult for one to voluntarily ask for help. Faith communities are among the safest resources to approach and are often the first place they may go, if they believe they are welcome. If they had a relationship with a faith community prior to their injury, that relationship may well be the most reliable and meaningful lifeline for them during their re-integration journey. Concurrently, it is important to be aware that reentry to a faith community can be a particular challenge as it may serve as a keen reminder of how they have been changed by their experiences while the community looks the same, especially if the community is inattentive to the potential for moral injury and its consequences.

Due, in part, to some of the tendencies alluded to above—such as the well-intentioned desire to provide healing in the face of suffering—some faith communities have not grappled fully with how to respond to moral injury in their midst. Questions for faith communities to consider include these: Are we deep enough, strong enough, honest enough, and patient enough to make room for and bear the weight of those with moral injury to share their story? Are we willing to weave such persons into the broader narrative of the life of our faith community rather than viewing them as a separate problem for our community to solve? If such a person appeared at the entrance of our church and confessed guilt and shame for things done or things undone, how would we respond, corporately and privately?

Answering these questions can help us understand our private and corporate attitudes, as well as our sense of responsibility as a faith community, toward those who seek our refuge. While many scriptural principles are relevant for such communal soul searching, it is worth reflecting in this process on one of the most foundational teachings of Jesus, who responded to a scribe's inquiry about the greatest commandment by saying,

The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.

*Mark 12:29-31*

At both communal and individual levels, how might faith communities be available, prepared, and responsible to the needs of "neighbors" who live with moral injury? How might these communities love as oneself a neighbor who is struggling with a sense of separation, distrust, or betrayal? And how will they respond if there is a sense that this betrayal has been perpetrated

by society, by the faith community, or by God? The witness of a community living in faith and fidelity with the gospel, even in the midst of a world frequently known to be in conflict with that same gospel, can in itself be a source of strength and healing for those with moral injury.

Jesus describes the summary of God's law as being centered in love. It is the central act in each of these relationships – with God, neighbor, and self – and is dependent upon the willingness to sacrifice, to make an investment of self in and for another. Knowing precisely how to practice love can be difficult to discern, perhaps especially in cases of moral injury. When should our love emphasize patience, when forgiveness, when truth, when kindness? It would be nice if these attributes of love were never in tension, but sometimes they seem to be so. Regardless, we assume both by our

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**As fellow pilgrims who appreciate the challenge of living with the past and looking to the future with a holy hope, we can help those paralyzed by moral injury to be less fearful of being fully present in the moment and integral to our communities.**

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faith and by membership in our society a certain shared moral responsibility and liability when we ask (either explicitly or implicitly) those who serve our country in the military, law enforcement, and other professions to place themselves in the midst of danger, violence, and sometimes traumatic events. This shared moral responsibility means that these individuals are our neighbors. It means that we are called to love them. And love, while requiring wise discernment at times, first requires showing up. It first necessitates being present to those who suffer.

Being present is often difficult. Yet, as a people and communities of hope, who we *are* can be more powerful than what we *do*. In much the same way that generosity of spirit is about who we are,<sup>7</sup> so too is love. Understood in this way, love is about making room for persons with moral injury – not fixing them or doing something to them *per se*. It is about finding a way to stand alongside them as they take the time needed to wrestle with difficult existential questions. Generally speaking, psychological science has taught us that attempting to avoid difficult thoughts, memories, and experiences does not work that well.<sup>8</sup> Love as practiced in our faith communities should not seek to operate this way either. It should not seek to present a false dichotomy, choosing either moral injury *or* hope. Rather, it should seek to present an '*and*' – moral injury and hope, and trust, and meaningful relationships. In this fashion, redemption for someone with moral injury is not a onetime event but a process lived out in faithful communities of care.



In some ways, it may be most helpful when we do not have all the answers to the challenges faced by those with moral injury. Such a stance of humility and implicit acknowledgement of the true difficulty posed by certain morally injurious challenges may prove the most effective way to demonstrate love, help someone be heard, and build trust. It is here that we may be given the opportunity to be a people in *status viatoris*, that ontological quality of being on-the-way to somewhere else and living with the tension of the “not-yet,” with hope. Among a lifetime of choices, only one alternative is barred to us—that of not being *en route* at all, of not being “on the way.” As fellow pilgrims who appreciate the challenge of living with the past and looking to the future with a holy hope, we can help those paralyzed by moral injury to be less fearful of being fully present in the moment, integral to our communities, and in relationship to us, their neighbors.

### **BEING THROUGH DOING**

While we present a dialectic between being and doing to illustrate the importance of embodying love and meaningfully embracing those with moral injury as members of our faith communities, the two complement each other. For clergy and faith community leaders desiring some signposts to direct their next steps, we provide the following considerations. They will help members effectively respond when those with moral injury seek their fellowship and support. We encourage having open and frank discussions on how to listen empathically, patiently, and non-judgmentally; help those suffering with moral injury to connect with others who suffer similarly; identify the good therapists in your city; recognize signs and symptoms of moral injury; invite those who suffer moral injury to identify and share their commitments, beliefs, and that which gives meaning and purpose to their lives; abide with them in their dark night without forcing their recovery or discounting their burden; and help them discover opportunities to engage in work where they can fruitfully apply skills they learned in the military.

Faith communities should be looked to as places of comfort and trust, of hope in the midst of darkness. They should be sought out as places that can witness the growth that is often an outcome of struggle, where one’s story (however challenging) can be told with courage and truthfulness, and where the reminder is constant that we need not face our trials alone. They ought to be a place where space is readily available for the sojourner with moral injury.

Our redemptive Creator God has abided with us at a great cost, with a love that allows unfathomable forgiveness and mercy, as well as the space and time for the working out of our faith to grow in love and friendship with both God and our neighbors. May we be communities of hospitality and care who are not afraid of the pain of our neighbors, and who can welcome the wounded and suffering among us because of our shared hope in this redemption that sustains us in the midst of our common frailties and human creatureliness.

**NOTES**

1 Jonathan Shay, "Learning about Combat Stress from Homer's *Iliad*," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 4:4 (October 1991), 561-579; Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31:2 (2014), 182-191; and Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29 (2009), 695-706.

2 Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury."

3 Brett T. Litz, et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans," 697.

4 Michael Yandell, "The War Within: A Veteran's Moral Injury," *The Christian Century* (January 7, 2015), 12-13, here citing 13.

5 Warren Kinghorn, "Combat Trauma and Moral Fragmentation: A Theological Account of Moral Injury," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 32:2 (2012), 57-74, here citing 59.

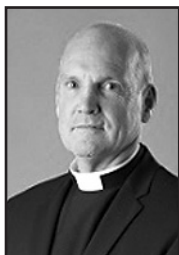
6 Michael Yandell, "The War Within," 13.

7 Douglas V. Henry, "Generosity of Spirit," *Generosity*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 57 (Waco, TX: The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University, October 2015), 11-18; available online at [www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/253574.pdf](http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/253574.pdf) (accessed February 2, 2016).

8 See, for example, Todd B. Kashdan, William E. Breen, and Terri Julian, "Everyday Strivings in Combat Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Suffering from a Hyper-Focus on Avoidance and Emotion Regulation," *Behavior Therapy*, 41 (2010), 350-363.

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# O Christ, You Did No Violence

B Y    C A R O L Y N   W I N F R E Y   G I L L E T T E

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O Christ, you did no violence yet you were crushed with pain;  
you suffered great injustice to make us whole again.  
As lambs are led to slaughter and sheep in silence wait,  
you gave your life to offer a love that conquers hate.

You gave your life to save us, yet, God, we now confess:  
forgetting that you love us, we live in hatefulness.  
We tolerate injustice that breaks the human soul;  
we overlook the madness as violence takes its toll.

When children hear the popping of one more fired gun  
and know there is no stopping and look for where to run,  
when workers face oppression, and women face abuse,  
Lord, hear your world's confession, for there is no excuse.

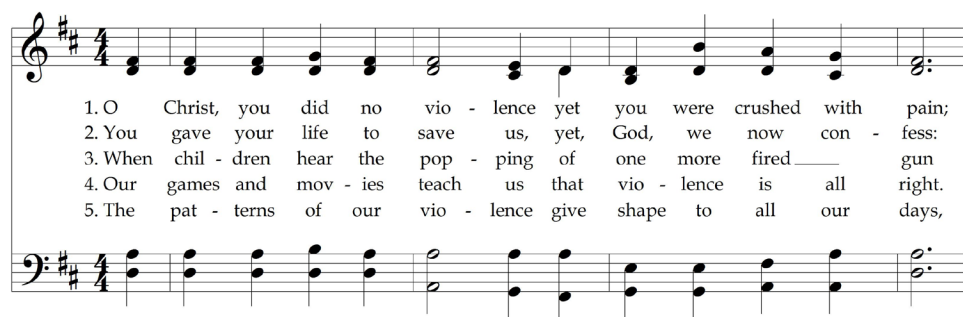
Our games and movies teach us that violence is all right.  
O God, our greed is boundless; our wealth depends on might.  
Our nations' moral failings in politics and war  
all lead to countless killings – to violence you abhor.

The patterns of our violence give shape to all our days,  
yet you, O God, are gracious; your ways are not our ways.  
Now by your Holy Spirit, we pray you'll make us new,  
till peace becomes our pattern as we all follow you.

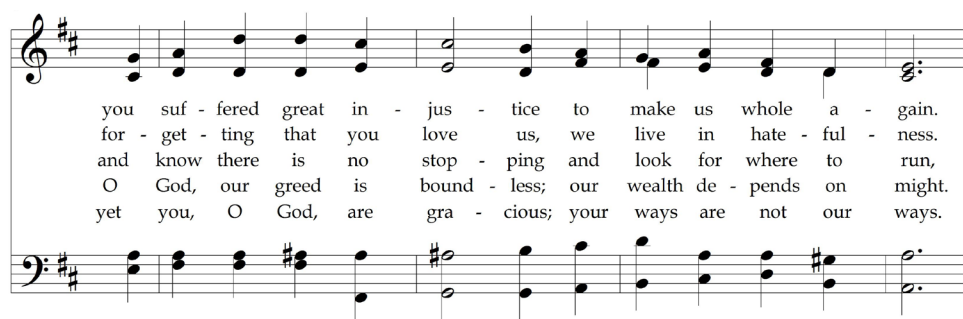
# O Christ, You Did No Violence

CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

SAMUEL S. WESLEY



1. O Christ, you did no vio - lence yet you were crushed with pain;  
 2. You gave your life to save us, yet, God, we now con - fess:  
 3. When chil - dren hear the pop - ping of one more fired — gun  
 4. Our games and mov - ies teach us that vio - lence is all right.  
 5. The pat - terns of our vio - lence give shape to all our days,



you suf - fered great in - jus - tice to make us whole a - gain.  
 for - get - ting that you love us, we live in hate - ful - ness.  
 and know there is no stop - ping and look for where to run,  
 O God, our greed is bound - less; our wealth de - pends on might.  
 yet you, O God, are gra - cious; your ways are not our ways.

As lambs are led to slaugh - ter and sheep in si - lence wait,  
 We tol - er - ate in - jus - tice that breaks the hu - man soul;  
 when work - ers face op - pres - sion, and wo - men face a - buse,  
 Our na - tions' mor - al fail - ings in pol - i - tics and war  
 Now by your Ho - ly Spir - it, we pray you'll make us new,

you gave your life to off - er a love that con - quers hate.  
 we o - ver - look the mad - ness as vio - lence takes its toll.  
 Lord, hear your world's con - fess - ion, for there is no ex - cuse.  
 all lead to count - less kill - ings—to vio - lence you ab - hor.  
 till peace be - comes our pat - tern as we all fol - low you.

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 Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: AURELIA  
 7.6.7.6.D

# Worship Service

BY BRUCE AND CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

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## *Call to Worship*<sup>1</sup>

God promises a day when swords will be turned into plowshares  
and spears into pruning hooks,

**when nations will spend resources on building peace  
instead of on waging war.**

God promises a day when children will be healthy and safe  
so they can live to adulthood,

**when the violence of injustice will not shorten their lives.**

God promises a day when people will build houses and inhabit them,  
and plant vineyards and eat their fruit,

**when the violence of greed will not drive the poor from their homes  
and livelihoods.**

God promises that the peacemakers will be blessed, as children of God.

**We gather to worship God who calls us to turn  
from the ways of violence  
to God's way of peace.**

## *Gathering Hymn*

*"Come, All You People"*

SHONA:

*Uyai mose,  
tinamate Mwari;*

*uyai mose,  
tinamate Mwari;*

*uyai mose,  
tinamate Mwari;*

*uyai mose zvino.*

ENGLISH:

Come all you people,  
come and praise your Maker;

come all you people,  
come and praise your Maker;

come all you people,  
come and praise your Maker;

come now and worship the Lord.

*Alexander Gondo, translated by I-to Loh (1986)*

Tune: UYAI MOSE

## *Call to Confession*

Jesus said: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (*Matthew 5:23-24*).

## *Litany of Confession*

God of love, we have created a patchwork of violence in your world.

**We have neglected your patterns of peace.**

We listen to people talking about the right to bear arms,

**but we forget the right of children to be safe in their homes.**

We talk about the importance of marriage,

**but we do little about abuse in families.**

We seek bargains in the store,

**but we overlook the violence and injustice that workers face as they make our cheap goods.**

We use energy like there is no tomorrow,

**but we ignore wars fought over oil and violence caused by greed.**

We desire the best for our children,

**but give them video games and movies that numb them to violence.**

Forgive us, we pray.

May we turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

**May we reject unjust laws and work to establish justice in the land.**

May we elect leaders who will seek the common good.

**May we seek peace in our families, our churches, our communities, our nation, and our world.**

*May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven! Amen.*

## *Assurance of Forgiveness*

Friends, hear the good news: "For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (*Ephesians 2:14*).

**God has taken away the things that separate us from one another.**

"For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son" (*John 3:16a*).

**God has taken away our separation from God.**

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

**Thanks be to God!**

## *Time with Children*

Let's think about what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). What are some places and ways we can work for peace? One of them is right in our own families. This Family Pledge of Nonviolence shows some ways we can practice peacemaking there.<sup>2</sup>

*(Distribute copies of the Pledge and briefly discuss some of the promises with the children. Encourage families to sign it and post it where they can see it.)*

### **Family Pledge of Nonviolence**

Making peace must start within ourselves and in our family. Each of us, members of the \_\_\_\_\_ family, commit ourselves as best we can to become nonviolent and peaceable people:

**To Respect Self and Others:** to respect myself, to affirm others, and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks, and self-destructive behavior.

**To Communicate Better:** to share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

**To Listen:** to listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insist on having my own way.

**To Forgive:** to apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

**To Respect Nature:** to treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

**To Play Creatively:** to select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny, or acceptable.

**To Be Courageous:** to challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

This is our pledge. These are our goals. We will check ourselves on what we have pledged once a month on \_\_\_\_\_ for the next twelve months so that we can help each other become more peaceable people.

Pledging family members sign below:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*"Eliminating violence, one family at a time, starting with our own."*



## *Scripture Readings*

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.  
They made his grave with the wicked  
and his tomb with the rich,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth.  
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.  
When you make his life an offering for sin,  
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;  
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

*Isaiah 53:7-10*

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

*James 4:1-3*

## *Sermon*

### *Hymn of Response*

“O Christ, You Did No Violence”

O Christ, you did no violence yet you were crushed with pain;  
you suffered great injustice to make us whole again.  
As lambs are led to slaughter and sheep in silence wait,  
you gave your life to offer a love that conquers hate.

You gave your life to save us, yet, God, we now confess:  
forgetting that you love us, we live in hatefulness.  
We tolerate injustice that breaks the human soul;  
we overlook the madness as violence takes its toll.

When children hear the popping of one more fired gun  
and know there is no stopping and look for where to run,  
when workers face oppression, and women face abuse,  
Lord, hear your world's confession, for there is no excuse.

Our games and movies teach us that violence is all right.  
O God, our greed is boundless; our wealth depends on might.  
Our nations' moral failings in politics and war  
all lead to countless killings – to violence you abhor.

The patterns of our violence give shape to all our days,  
yet you, O God, are gracious; your ways are not our ways.  
Now by your Holy Spirit, we pray you'll make us new,  
till peace becomes our pattern as we all follow you.

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2016)*

*Suggested Tunes: AURELIA or LLANGLOFFAN*  
(pp. 43-45 in this volume)

### *Litany of Dedication*

Gracious God, all that we are and all that we have are gifts from you.

**In thanks, we give you some of the blessings we have received.**

We give you our money

so the church can be your peace in this community.

**We give you our minutes and our hours**

**so the church has enough workers to be your peace in this  
neighborhood.**

We give you our skills, our talents, our ideas, and our imagination

so the church is strong to be your peace in this world.

**As Christ is our peace,**

**we seek to be your peace in a violent and troubled world. Amen.**

### *Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession*

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for entering into this violent  
world with the gift of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We thank you for those people who seek to counter hatred with love,  
who protect others in gentle, caring ways,  
who help others in our community,  
who teach others to settle differences peacefully, and  
who work for the healing of creation and bring hope to your hurting  
world.

We pray for people who are suffering because of violence in their lives  
and communities.

We pray especially for children who are abused in their families,  
for little ones who are hurt by powers that put self-interest and profit  
before love,  
for women who live in fear of domestic violence, and  
for others who are hurt and manipulated by those who are stronger.

We pray for people whose homes have been destroyed by the weapons  
of war, and whose spirits and bodies have been broken by violence.

We pray for those who are denied clean water and air,  
and do not have a healthy environment.

O God of peace, may we, your church, bring your peace into this  
hurting world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### *Hymn of Commitment*

“God of Grace and God of Glory”

God of grace and God of glory,  
on your people pour your power;  
crown your ancient church’s story,  
bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.

Lo! the hosts of evil round us  
scorn the Christ, assail his ways!  
From the fears that long have bound us  
free our hearts to faith and praise.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the living of these days,  
for the living of these days.

Cure your children’s warring madness;  
bend our pride to your control;  
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss your kingdom’s goal,  
lest we miss your kingdom’s goal.

Save us from weak resignation  
to the evils we deplore;  
let the gift of your salvation  
be our glory evermore.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
serving you whom we adore,  
serving you whom we adore.

*Harry E. Fosdick (1930), alt.*  
*Tune: CWM RHONDDA*

### *Benediction*<sup>3</sup>

May God bless you with a restless *discomfort*  
about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with *holy anger*  
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace  
among all people.

May God bless you with the *gift of tears*  
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the  
loss of all that they cherish,  
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform  
their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough *foolishness*  
to believe that you really can make a difference in this world,  
so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim  
cannot be done.

Amen.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Based on Isaiah 2:2-4, 65:17-35, and Matthew 5:9.

<sup>2</sup> *Family Pledge of Nonviolence* is produced by the Institute for Peace and Justice ([www.ipj-ppj.org](http://www.ipj-ppj.org)), 475 East Lockwood Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63119; phone: (314) 918-2630. You are free to make copies of the pledge as long as you keep the Institute for Peace and Justice name and contact information on the copies. If the pledge is not used during the children's time, consider incorporating it into the worship service in some other way. If it is introduced to the congregation during the sermon, have copies available in the worship bulletin or for pick-up after the service.

3 The benediction is adapted from a prayer available on the Internet, which is usually cited as “A Four-fold Benedictine Blessing” by Sister Ruth Marlene Fox, O.S.B. (1985).

4 You can adapt this worship service for your congregation’s specific concerns regarding violence by adjusting the sermon topic and substituting one of the following hymns by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette for the Hymn of Response. The following texts are copyrighted by the hymn writer, who retains all rights to their use. She gives permission to *Christian Reflection* readers for the free use of these hymns in a local church. These and other new hymns by Gillette are available online at [www.carolynshymns.com](http://www.carolynshymns.com). Email her at [bcgillette@comcast.net](mailto:bcgillette@comcast.net) to request other permissions or to obtain copies formatted in Microsoft Word™ for a worship bulletin insert or projection software.

The first hymn addresses the violence of war. Written on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, it was published in Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009).

“God, Whose Love Is Always Stronger”

God, whose love is always stronger  
than our weakness, pride and fear,  
in your world, we pray and wonder  
how to be more faithful here.

Hate too often grows inside us;  
fear rules what the nations do.  
So we pray, when wars divide us:  
Give us love, Lord! Make us new!

Love is patient, kind and caring,  
never arrogant or rude,  
never boastful, all things bearing;  
love rejoices in the truth.  
When we’re caught up in believing  
war will make the terror cease,  
show us Jesus’ way of living;  
may our strength be in your peace.

May our faith in you be nourished;  
may your churches hear your call.  
May our lives be filled with courage  
as we speak your love for all.  
Now emboldened by your Spirit  
who has given us new birth,  
give us love, that we may share it  
til your love renews the earth!

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette* (2003). All rights reserved.

*Suggested Tunes:* BEACH SPRING, ABBOT’S LEIGH, or HYFRYDOL

The next hymn laments gun violence. Its unusual title refers to the total number of people (335,609) who died from gun violence in America between 2000 and 2010 – more than the population of St. Louis, MO (318,069), Pittsburgh, PA (307,484), Cincinnati, OH (296,223), Newark, NJ (277,540), or Orlando, FL (243,195) (source: “Just the Facts: Gun Violence in America,” January 16, 2013, [usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/01/16/16547690-just-the-facts-gun-violence-in-america?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/01/16/16547690-just-the-facts-gun-violence-in-america?lite)).

"335,609 (I Cried to God)"

I cried to God, "Three hundred thirty thousand!  
Five thousand more, six hundred more, and nine!"  
In just ten years, a truth we can't imagine:  
all died from guns, one loved one at a time!  
And then I heard... "Whom shall I send to grieve them?  
Go tell the world: 'I love them! They are mine!'"

I asked the Lord, "Why is there so much violence?  
If you are God, why don't you stop the pain?  
God, won't you speak? For all around is madness!  
Just say the word and make us whole again!"  
And then I heard... "Whom shall I send as prophets?  
Speak out my truth! Shout till the killings end!"

I knelt and prayed, and wept for all the fallen;  
so many lives, so many dreams now gone.  
More than a name—each one was someone's cousin,  
or someone's child, or someone counted on.  
And then I heard... "Whom shall I send, who knew them,  
to work for peace, to labor till the dawn?"

Lord, here am I! And here we are, together!  
No one alone can end this killing spree.  
The powers of death pit one against another,  
yet you are God and you desire peace.  
As mourners, prophets, laborers together,  
give us the strength to make the killings cease.

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2015) All rights reserved.  
Tune: FINDLANDIA*

The following hymn, based on the story in John 8:1-11, laments violence against women.

"Christ Would Not Cast the Judgment Stone"

Christ would not cast the judgment stone  
at one who stood afraid, alone;  
he stopped the violence in that place  
by speaking truth and showing grace.

To one the world would not protect,  
Christ offered care and showed respect;  
in one whom others cast away,  
he saw a child of God that day.

May we show Christ's compassion here  
to girls and women bound by fear,  
to those who live in silent pain,  
to those who can't go home again.

We pray for those who from their birth  
are never shown their human worth;  
we pray for women hurt this day  
while others turn their eyes away.

O God, may we who call you Lord  
now labor for a world restored,  
where, in your image, all will be  
protected, valued, safe and free.

*Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2013) All rights reserved.*

*Suggested Tunes: GERMANY, WOODWORTH, or O WALY WALY*

The final hymn specifically addresses the issue of violence in marriage.

*“God of Love, We’ve Heard the Teaching”*

God of love, we’ve heard the teaching: “Wives must honor and obey!”  
Yet your scriptures say submission doesn’t only go one way.  
For as wives are called to honor, so are husbands called to be  
Christ-like as they serve their partners, loving sacrificially.

We have heard of preachers preaching: “You should stay! God hates divorce!”  
God, we know of victims, suffering, who’ve been told to stay the course.  
Yet it’s those who are abusive who have torn their vows in two;  
for their violence and excuses cause great pain and anger you.

God, we’ve heard the old, old saying, “Better stay with what you know.”  
So we pray for women wondering, “Should I stay or should I go?”  
When they ask, “Will others help me? Who will come and stand by me?” –  
may they know we love them dearly. We will be there; they will see!

God, we’ve heard a world of teachings; show us what is really true –  
that you weep with those who suffer as they daily face abuse.  
You want couples to be loving and to listen, share, and give.  
This is mutual submission; this is how we’re called to live.

By your Spirit, may we witness to your peaceful, loving way.  
May we share your love and justice every moment, every day.  
May the people hurt by violence know they’re valued, by your grace,  
and may all who are in crisis find a refuge in this place.

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*Tune: BEACH SPRING*



**BRUCE AND CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE**  
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Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* portrays  
martyrdom with the drama and realism characteristic  
of the Baroque era.

Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi da) (1573-1610), *CRUCIFIXION OF SAINT PETER* (1600-1601). Oil on canvas. 7' 6 1/2" x 6' 8 3/4". Cerasi Chapel, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.



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# Depicting Martyrdom

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The violent persecution of Christians in the early church is reflected in the paintings of martyrs. The martyrdom of the Apostle Peter occurred in Rome in the first century during the reign of Emperor Nero (54-68). Origen (185-232) reports that Peter was crucified in Rome with his head downwards, an orientation that the apostle preferred so as not to imitate the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Caravaggio, the great Italian painter of the Baroque style, continues that tradition in his painting, *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, which was commissioned in September 1600 by Cardinal Tiberio Cesari for his chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. Cesari, who also commissioned Caravaggio to depict the *Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* across the chapel from the *Crucifixion*, died shortly after the commission.

The second painting discussed here, by the fifteenth-century North Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, depicts the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Sebastian died about 288, during the reign of Diocletian (284-305), which is the time when the greatest number of Christian persecutions is believed to have occurred. Sebastian's acts, wrongly ascribed to Ambrose, are a fifth-century legend. It is believed that he entered the army at Rome during the brief reign of the previous Emperor Carinus (282-285) to aid the martyrs. He became one of the captains of the Praetorian Guard under Diocletian, who was unaware that he was Christian. When his faith was discovered, Sebastian was sentenced by Diocletian to be shot by archers. Miraculously he lived through the ordeal—perhaps, as legend has it, by the intervention of Irene of Rome, who was the widow of Castulus, the chamberlain of Diocletian and another martyr of this era. Sebastian regained his strength and continued to assist Christians. When his work was exposed a second time, he was beaten to death. Sebastian is the patron saint of plague victims and soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

These two paintings allow an exceptionally informative comparison between the Renaissance and Baroque styles of painting which began in Italy. Mantegna, an artist working in Milan, Padua, and Venice, and fully aware of the happenings in early fifteenth-century Florence, depicts Sebastian in a characteristic Renaissance manner. The martyr, as is typical in the visual tradition, is painted at the moment when he has been shot with numerous arrows. Yet his body is more reminiscent of a fifth-century classical Greek sculpture in *contrapposto* (with counterpoised shifting of weight) and is tied

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*Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), SAINT SEBASTIAN (1456-1459). Oil on panel. 26 3/4" x 11 4/5". Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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to a Corinthian column. The proportions of the classical body had been lost during the medieval period and were only rediscovered in the fifteenth century. The body is modeled, lifelike, and stable. Surrounding Sebastian are antique ruins (the arch, fragments at his feet, and so on). Even though Sebas-

tian is persecuted at the height of the Roman period, Mantegna places him in a contemporary Renaissance setting with these ruins surrounding him. The ruins were frequently brought from Rome and Greece to artists' studios so that they could copy them and incorporate their design into painted and sculpted compositions. Atmospheric perspective is used for the buildings in the background and the entire composition utilizes one-point linear perspective to give a heightened sense of three-dimensional space. All of these are characteristics of the Renaissance and its reinvention of ancient humanism.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the *Saint Sebastian*, the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* is dynamic, realistic, and powerful. Caravaggio, the leading painter of the Italian Baroque, is famous for his realism and dramatic compositions. He incorporates the potent physicality of figures found in the sculptures of the High Renaissance artist Michelangelo.<sup>4</sup> The tenebrist lighting, strong and raking, creates a theatrical, immediate, and intense composition. The three soldiers' straining, physical movements form a complex set of diagonals in the composition. Peter is leaning forward as if somehow to object to the hoisting of the cross upwards, but is struggling with gravity. The buttocks and dirty feet of the soldier in the foreground are pushed out towards the picture plane and into our space. As we study the rope and understand what is about to occur, we wonder if the rope is actually strong enough to support the weight being lifted. The nail holes in Peter's feet and left hand are realistically painted. The drama and realism of the Baroque are clearly present in this painting, which portrays the scene of martyrdom in a new and fresh way.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Johann Peter Kirsch, "St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), [www.newadvent.org/cathen/11744a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11744a.htm) (accessed March 24, 2016).

2 David Hugh Farmer, "Sebastian," *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, fourth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 447.

3 To view Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* in color and for further discussion, see [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/renaissance-venice/venice-early-ren/v/andrea-mantegna-saint-sebastian-c-1456-59](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/renaissance-venice/venice-early-ren/v/andrea-mantegna-saint-sebastian-c-1456-59) (accessed April 4, 2016).

4 Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 136.

5 To view Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* in color, see [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/caravaggio-crucifixion-of-st-peter-1601](http://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/caravaggio-crucifixion-of-st-peter-1601) (accessed April 4, 2016).



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*In **The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic**, Fra Angelico transforms a scene of humiliating violence into a meditative and contemplative image.*

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# Meditating on Christ's Suffering

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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**G**uido di Pietro, who became Fra Angelico when he joined the Dominican order in Fiesole, Italy, had worked as a painter in Tuscany and Rome. By their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Observants of the Order of Preachers (which is the true name of the Dominicans) gave up the right to own private property, to marry and have children, and to make personal and professional decisions on the basis of their own best interests.<sup>1</sup>

Fra Angelico, together with his assistants, produced over fifty frescoes and tempera panels. This represents the largest body of monastic decoration from any period in the history of art. The artist was a monk in San Domenico in Fiesole, which was the parent community to San Marco, Florence, where this fresco, *The Mocking and Flagellation of Christ with the Virgin Mary and Saint Dominic*, is painted in a monastic cell (single dormitory room).

Of all the religious orders, only the Dominicans considered visual images so crucial to prayer, meditation, and study that they mandated the use of images in their dormitories.<sup>2</sup> Fra Angelico presupposed that the beholder would instantly comprehend the relationship of his frescoes to the Dominican habits of prayer, liturgical customs, and practices of reading and studying.<sup>3</sup>

The cell of each friar in the monastery of San Marco was furnished not only with a bed, desk, chair, and prayer kneeler, but also a contemplative image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or Saint Dominic. The frescos in the twenty cells on the east corridor were inspired by scenes in the life of Christ or the Virgin; they correspond to the major feasts of the liturgical year and invite meditative reflection on the mysteries of the faith. They led the friars to identify with the mystical life of notable forerunners, mostly Dominican, as they meditated on the liturgical texts associated with the major feasts of the church calendar.<sup>4</sup> While these frescoes "may not precisely conform to the [Dominican] Constitutions' dictates, they satisfy the spirit of those requirements and even go beyond them," William Hood observes.<sup>5</sup>

*The Mocking of Christ*, one of Fra Angelico's most famous and transcendent cell frescoes, is found in a senior cleric's cell.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Miles astutely notes that this depiction is like no other treatment of the biblical scene:

The monk is directed to identify with the blindfolded Christ as the scene takes place from Christ's perspective. The Dominican viewer sees only what Christ feels. No human being inflicts the blows Christ suffers. Only the body parts that strike, that spit, are shown. Christ holds the bat and ball his mockers have required in mockery of a scepter and globe. One mocker raises his hat in mock imitation of a gesture of respect as he spits. The monastic onlooker, Dominic, has closed eyes and a peaceful, even relaxed body, showing no visible emotion, while the Virgin exhibits a quiet sadness. They are not engaged in the emotions of the event, but in meditation on it.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the depicted acts of violence were intended to humiliate Christ, Fra Angelico portrays him as a figure enthroned in majesty. Perhaps this fresco will lead us, like the fifteenth-century clerics for whom the blessed Dominican friar painted the image, to meditate on the imitation of the suffering Christ.

## NOTES

1 William Hood, *Fra Angelico: San Marco, Florence*, The Great Fresco Cycles of the Renaissance (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 25.

2 *Ibid.*, 34.

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 34.

5 *Ibid.*, 40.

6 John T. Spike, "A Pauline Source for 'The Mocking of Christ' by Fra Angelico in Cell 7 of the Convent of San Marco," in Achim Gnann and Heinz Widauer, eds., *Festschrift für Konrad Oberhuber* (Milan, IT: Electa, 2000), 14-16.

7 Margaret Miles, "Achieving the Christian Body," in Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, eds., *Interpreting Christian Art* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 18-19.

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# Consuming Violence: Voyeurism versus Vision

BY DANIEL TRAIN

**We are tempted to be voyeurs of violence, dangerously drinking it in as entertainment. Or we turn away instead to sentimentalized distractions, which promise to be safer and proclaim our moral superiority. Neither represents a cross-shaped vision of the violence in our culture.**

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**I**n a memorable story about his friend Alypius, Augustine presents a portrait of both the strong appeal of viewing violence and our ineffectual struggle to resist it. Alypius, who “had been carried away by an incredible passion for gladiatorial shows,” became deeply ashamed of his fascination with the gruesome contests and vowed never to return to the “games.” Then one evening some of Alypius’s friends and fellow-pupils, employing their “friendly violence,” took him to a gladiatorial event. Nevertheless, he was determined not to pay any attention to the gory spectacle before him; he even hoped that his condemnation of it (and scorn for the debauched friends) would be strengthened by being present, but refusing to watch. Not surprisingly, the roar of the crowd proved too much for his willpower. Augustine explains,

His curiosity got the better of him, and thinking that he would be able to treat the sight with scorn – whatever the sight might be – he opened his eyes and was stricken with a deeper wound in the soul than the man whom he had opened his eyes to see got in the body.<sup>1</sup>

Alypius’s “wound” was not a one-time laceration, but a parasitic disease that would increasingly plague and debilitate him:

Seeing the blood he drank deep of the savagery. He did not turn

away but fixed his gaze upon the sight.... He continued to gaze, shouted, grew hot, and when he departed took with him a madness by which he was to be goaded to come back again, not only with those who at first took him there, but even more than they and leading on others.<sup>2</sup>

In no time at all, Alypius had traded places with those friends whom he scorned. He was rendered absolutely powerless against his self-corroding addiction to viewing the bloodshed. Fortunately, Augustine can conclude his story with a prayer to God that brims with gratitude for the divine grace that eventually would rescue Alypius: "Yet out of all this You drew him with strong and merciful hand, teaching him to have confidence in You, not in himself. But this was long after."<sup>3</sup>

This episode is emblematic of some difficult questions Christian believers have faced through the centuries when the surrounding cultural practices and civil politics seem to perpetuate, justify, or be complicit in violence. Today it is extraordinarily easy to record, disseminate, and view gruesome cruelty; consider, for example, the widely viewed ISIS beheadings. Certain sporting events, like the Ultimate Fighting Championship, entertain their audiences with bloodshed. And these examples are only the tip of the cultural iceberg; we are constantly entertained by massive amounts of violence in movies, television shows, video games, popular music, and news reports. Why are we so drawn to viewing violence, and how are we being changed by this? Does it make any difference whether the acts of mayhem are real (in news and sporting events) or imagined (through films, video games, and literature)? There may be good uses of violence in popular culture, but when does it cross a moral line?

We can make more progress in answering these questions if we shift our focus from the *content* of the violence to its *context*. In other words, we should ask how we, as observers, are complicit in the violence we consume, as well as how we suffer the destructive consequences of our voyeuristic gazes.

This shift in focus is evident within Augustine's narrative. While he highlights the lasting damage that was inflicted upon Alypius by viewing such gratuitous, self-serving violence, he also reminds us of the role Alypius played as a spectator in perpetrating acts of violence. While he describes the bloody gladiatorial spectacle, he is more concerned with exhibiting Alypius's misplaced self-confidence. Augustine suggests that the very gaze Alypius extended towards the gladiators was as violent as the "game" itself. Indeed, even before his fateful relapse, Alypius seems to be subject to Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees: "you testify against yourselves" (Matthew 23:31).

Augustine implies that Alypius's voyeuristic fascination was of a piece with, and not counter to, the moral resolve he flaunted before his downfall. Whether as the scornful avoider or the insatiable viewer of the games, Alypius always thought he was "above" the spectacle and thus, as a voyeur, was



able to take from the games whatsoever he desired from them. Before, during, and after his fateful fall, he was the consummate consumer of violence—a voyeur for whom the games remained a means to a self-serving end.

In this article I will explore Augustine's warning against the violence caused by our own misplaced self-confidence. After reflecting briefly on the limitations of the way the debate about viewing violence is often construed, I will turn to a short story by Flannery O'Connor for a reminder about how violence can occur not only in *what* we see, but in *how* we see. As O'Connor's story suggests, admitting this possibility is the first step towards discerning the difference between a violent voyeurism and a cross-shaped vision of the world. Such a vision only comes after our own tendencies for self-deception have been unmasked, and this often requires a difficult and painful struggle.

### **APPROACHES TO THE VIOLENCE IN CULTURE**

In my own experience, Augustine's concern that perceiving violence (both actual and feigned) can corrupt the viewer's soul was transmuted by some Christian educators into the less eloquent, though no less effective dictum: "Garbage in. Garbage out." Like Augustine, my teachers rightly understood that the soul is nourished or malnourished by its experiences—the soul is like a tree, the fruit of which directly attests to the quality of soil and water upon which the tree feeds. Almost without fail, they followed this pithy principle of moral formation by quoting Paul's exhortation that the believers in Philippi should think on "whatsoever things" are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Though Paul does not exactly say that his list is comprehensive, that is how my teachers presented it to me; "whatsoever" in this case was synonymous with "only."

Despite the ubiquity of this sentiment in Christian circles, its direct equation of input and outputs is too simplistic as a principle for Christian living. This simplistic garbage in-garbage out equation suggests that sorting out cultural objects is a fairly straightforward task. But we all encounter things that could be described as true but not lovely, or as lovely but not true. For example, couldn't a movie, a painting, or a novel be honest, but not virtuous?

Furthermore, this teaching fails to do justice to the sinful distortions of our knowing. Our ability to discern what is worth "thinking on" presumably depends on our having been nourished by what is true, honest, and just. But as Augustine's account shows, the tragic cost of being entertained by violence is that we may become increasingly incapable of sorting out the garbage from whatever is of "good report." At its best, then, this dictum becomes yet another instance of the Church preaching to its own choir.

Perhaps more importantly, this saying commends the wrong kind of isolationism that would have us evade cultural detritus altogether. This certainly does not match Christ's own example of "eating with sinners and

tax collectors” (Mark 2:6; cf. Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34) in order to witness and attend to the ugliness, injustice, and dishonesty of human fallenness. So, the question is not simply whether we have the moral faculty to discern the difference between trash and truth, but whether attending to the truth might also require us to spend some time in the apparent wastelands of human culture. As the horrors of the last century so tragically demon-

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**Two opposite approaches to violence in news, sports, movies, music, and literature—“no garbage in” isolation and “all things are lawful” participation—go awry if they focus only on the *content* of the cultural object and ignore the *context* in which we relate to it.**

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strate, our complicity as Christians in the most murderous events in human history was rarely because we were too curious, but because we found it too easy to turn our gaze away.

Perhaps in reaction to this history and to the widespread caricature of Christian moral teaching as prudish, other believers emphasize the freedom we have in Christ to participate in culture. They argue that

cultural and personal transformation occurs only when we engage the good, the bad, and the ugly this world offers, rather than avoid it and take refuge in so-called Christian alternatives. From their perspective, the rise of modern Christian “alternatives” to popular movies, visual art, music, or literary fiction is self-defeating; it only fuels the criticism that when artists try to make morally “wholesome” works of art, they show a complete disregard for the integrity of their craft, materials, and audiences that is at least equal to, if not worse than, the portrayal of violence they seek to avoid. Proponents of this approach remind us that, in so far as it evades reality and discourages taking proper action, such Christian sentimentalism can be as destructive as those forces it avoids or ignores.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the driving force behind these calls for more honest, less fear-driven encounters with the world is the very sort of unspoken spiritual hubris that Augustine observed in Alypius and so powerfully warns us to avoid. Thus, some may tell us that “mature” Christians need not worry about being corrupted themselves by the corruption they observe. “All things are lawful,” this siren call repeats in our ear, while willfully ignoring the Apostle Paul’s rejoinder that we therefore should seek that which edifies and benefits the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:23). And, like Eve in the garden, we soon convince ourselves that we can just taste of the fruit without suffering the deathly consequences.

Both of these approaches—the one that advocates “no garbage in” isolation and the other that promotes “all things are lawful” participation—go

awry when they focus exclusively on the *content* of the cultural object, and ignore the *context* in which we relate to it. They worry about how much violence, sex, or foul language is too much, as if this content could be known, quantified, and categorized objectively apart from our relationship to and use of it. They strive to label certain isolated depictions as permissible or impermissible, as though these could have a clear meaning and purpose apart from their context within the object itself, and in regard to our own, often self-serving, motivations. Meanwhile, what is sorely missing is an honest assessment of our own posture towards and responsibility for violence.

Both of these approaches offer rating systems that purport to assess objectively the appropriateness of the material for a given audience. The ratings in a “no garbage in” approach, of course, tend to be more restrictive than the ratings of an “all things are lawful” approach. Such ratings can be helpful. But it would more profitable to supplement such judgments with critical reflection on our practices as consumers and the possibility that real violence occurs not only in *what* we consume, but also in *how* we consume it. We would consider not just the material itself, but the many ways we might misuse or distort it, regardless of whether the content is on the surface morally objectionable.

We will discover that Christian sentimentalism (and the cultural isolationism it encourages) can be as destructive as Alypius’s over confidence (and the self-harming, prurient gaze it allowed). Both engage in the self-indulgence of the controlling voyeur: the former evades cultural violence by retreating into artificially contrived distractions that are supposed to provide security or proclaim moral superiority; the latter consumes cultural violence readily through media that permit only a one-sided exposure. Neither demonstrates a genuine regard for the victim of violence; neither accepts the personal risk and responsibility required by a sincere encounter. Instead, both encourage us to either peek or not at the world before us, while preserving the comforts of our own carefully constructed “realities.”

We seem to be stuck with a practical dilemma. If both the sentimentalist and the gladiatorial spectator are capable of perpetrating a violence equal to the violence which they ignore or relish, is it even possible to avoid the violence of the voyeur? How might we avoid falling into either trap? Can we reject the spectacle of violence without simply using that rejection to bolster our naive self-assurances that we are, morally and spiritually, above the fray?

## **VOYEURS AND THE FESTIVAL OF VIOLENCE**

In a remarkable short story “The Partridge Festival,” Flannery O’Connor unmasks the violence and voyeuristic tendencies of two very different approaches to civic violence. Each year the community of Partridge hosts an Azalea Festival, but this year’s installment has been marred by terrible violence. Just ten days earlier a man named Singleton had been “imprisoned” by a mock court for not purchasing a badge for the upcoming festival; when

he escaped that humiliation (he was locked in an outdoor privy), he shot and killed five of the city dignitaries in revenge. Singleton had long been an outlier in Partridge; his public humiliation was just the last straw before those awful events that led to his arrest and committal to a state mental institution. Now the entire town, whose motto is “Beauty is our Money Crop,” has rallied together not only in condemnation of Singleton, but to make sure that the upcoming Azalea Festival goes on undisturbed, despite the terrible massacre that has just taken place.

The story is clearly based on a similar event that occurred in the author’s hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia. O’Connor leads us into her story through the eyes of Calhoun, a college-aged young man who has heard about the events in his former hometown and has returned with the hope of gathering “material” for a novel. Unlike the people of Partridge, Calhoun believes that Singleton serves as both a scapegoat and mirror for the community’s own acts of cruelty that exist despite (and now, indeed, because of) the town’s pride in its perfectly manicured azalea bushes.

Calhoun (like Augustine’s friend, Alypius) has a great deal of scorn for the violence and the community that engendered it; his agenda is to exonerate Singleton somehow while condemning the town. Along the way, he meets Mary Elizabeth, an aspiring academic who is also interested in writing a “study” of Singleton as the village scapegoat. Though throughout most of the story Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth are trying to outdo one another, they clearly share a self-righteous disgust for the town and its festivities, and a strong interest in making Singleton into a “Christ-figure.”

In classic O’Connor fashion, the story ends with a revelation that completely undermines how Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth have made Singleton into a hero and thus into an abstraction that feeds their self-serving agendas. The story shockingly unmask the voyeuristic postures of both the academic and the artist. Neither Calhoun nor Mary Elizabeth had any direct involvement in the tragic events that prompt the story. But now, their playing the role of mere observer, superciliously assuring themselves that tragedy and violence always happens to “them” and not “me,” is itself a form of violence.<sup>5</sup>

O’Connor’s story makes no excuses for Singleton’s horrific actions, nor does it absolve the town for its violent sentimentalism – namely, its efforts to cultivate an image of politeness and civility whatever the cost. But it focuses on Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, who despite their supposedly noble intentions are ultimately revealed to be as voyeuristic and eager to use Singleton for their own self-serving purposes as the rest of the townsfolk. As is so typical of O’Connor, no one in this story is exonerated, especially those who think themselves worthy to judge.

What is especially striking, however, is how O’Connor ultimately turns the critique upon herself. When Calhoun waxes eloquently about his imagined novel, O’Connor often gives him lines that are nearly direct quotations of things she had professed in her essays and interviews. Moreover, Mary

Elizabeth's biting sarcasm and disinterestedness are clearly reminiscent of the real life Mary Flannery O'Connor. So it is not hard to imagine O'Connor setting out to write a story inspired by her own experience in Milledgeville, and yet gradually realizing that the impulse to make a character either out of the real life Singleton or her own town would be to engage in the same abstracting and "othering" that fueled the violence in the first place. It is quite possible that she began writing a story intended to be about the event itself, but then realized that she could not write that story without in some way using the event for her own gain—either as an opportunity for entertainment or as a way to bolster her self-righteousness.

As I read it, then, "The Partridge Festival" is a remarkable examination of conscience by a writer who knew all too well the twin voyeuristic temptations: to leer pruriently at her community's dysfunction, or to disguise the difficult reality of her hometown behind a veneer of azaleas. Rather than seeing the tragic events in her community as an opportunity for personal profit and thereby only perpetuating the cycle of violence, she shifts the focus of the story to people's efforts to retell the story. In doing so, she includes herself and her audience among those chastened.

O'Connor's willingness to engage in the difficult, often painful task of self-examination both calls for and models the difficult work of discernment we should practice in regards to violence in our culture. Certainly there are manifestations of violence in sports, news media, television shows, movies, video games, music, and literature today that are as spiritually destructive as the gladiatorial spectacle was in Augustine's day: Christians probably ought to avoid these altogether (though, admittedly, persons will be susceptible to the appeal and danger of these particular manifestations in varying degrees). But there are other instances of entertainment that, precisely because they sugarcoat reality or demonstrate a willful avoidance of the world's injustice and suffering, can be just as dangerous for certain individuals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Both Augustine, through the story of Alypius's fall, and Flannery O'Connor in "The Partridge Festival" have much to teach us about being voyeurs of violence in our culture. It is spiritually dangerous to drink it in, and this makes the "no garbage in" approach tempting. It is spiritually dangerous to avert our gaze from the evil and sentimentalize our culture's goodness, and this makes the "all things are lawful" attitude alluring.

A third way of approaching the violence is possible. We can cultivate practices of reception and self-examination that give us a more honest assessment of and loving appreciation for both the world and ourselves. Such a clear-eyed vision of our world is a gift of God's grace, both Augustine and O'Connor suggest. It is a gift that has been modeled for us in both the way Christ lived and the way he died. May the "strong and merciful" hand of the Holy Spirit teach us to place our confidence in Christ.

**NOTES**

1 Augustine recounts this episode in *Confessions*, VI.8. The translation here is from Augustine, *Confessions*, second edition, translated by F. J. Sheed and edited by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 105.

2 *Ibid.*, 105-106.

3 *Ibid.*, 106.

4 Flannery O'Connor, for example, puts it this way: a Christian artist "feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe. He feels perfectly free to look at the one we already have and to show exactly what he sees. He feels no need to apologize for the ways of God to man or to avoid looking at the ways of man to God. For him, to 'tidy up reality' is certainly to succumb to the sin of pride" (Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald [New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1969], 178).

5 John Milbank refers to this phenomenon as "double passivity." He explains, "If we merely look upon the violent past in judgement...we get in this position of double passivity *vis-à-vis* the past, where we imagine that violence is essentially over, and so frameable by our gaze. We then do violence to the past, because we render it *too* different from our present, and fail to sympathize with its dilemmas." (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon, Radical Orthodoxy Series* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 36).

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# Responding to Domestic Violence and Spiritual Abuse

BY AL MILES

**The victims and survivors of domestic violence and spiritual abuse frequently turn first to spiritual leaders and lay congregation members for refuge. Members of faith communities need to acquire the proper training to respond in an appropriate and effective manner.**

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**A**ccording to national statistics, one in every four women will experience some tactic of emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, or spiritual abuse from a male intimate partner in her lifetime. The victims and survivors will frequently turn first to spiritual leaders and lay congregation members when seeking refuge. Often times, however, these key individuals in the life of the women are ill-prepared to respond in an appropriate and effective manner.

Here are a few practical steps to encourage members of faith communities to consider.<sup>†</sup> First, *make the safety of a victim-survivor and her children top priority*. This is a vital first step. Often spiritual leaders and congregation members express the desire to “save a marriage” and “keep a family together.” These goals, however, should only be considered after a perpetrator has gone through an offender-specific program, after there is reasonable certainty that his abusive behavior has completely stopped, and only if the victim-survivor wishes to continue in the relationship.

Second, *hold the abuser accountable*. A perpetrator of domestic violence rarely takes responsibility for the destruction he causes. Instead he will blame alcohol and other drugs, children, job stresses, mood swings, Satan, and, especially, the very woman he is violating. Members of faith communi-

ties need to be cautioned to not get taken in by an abuser's slick and manipulative ways. They must also be encouraged to resist the notion that no self-professed "man of God" would use violence and other abuse tactics to control his wife or girlfriend.

*Listen to and believe a victim's story.* Always thank a victim-survivor for the courage and trust she demonstrates by sharing her story. Tell her that there is no excuse or justification for domestic violence. Refrain from asking for more details about the abuse than what a victim-survivor volunteers, especially if you are a male and there has been any act of sexual violence. Also, never ask a victim-survivor why it took her so long to disclose the abuse or why she stays with her abuser. These questions could appear as though the victim-survivor is being blamed for her own victimization.

*Do not recommend or participate in couples' or marriage counseling.* It is a common but dangerous mistake to suggest that a battered woman and her partner or husband seek couples' or marriage counseling. Domestic violence is *not* about men and women struggling as a couple. It is about the conscious decision of one partner, usually the male, to use abusive and violent tactics to maintain power and control over his female intimate partner. Couples' or marriage counseling is inappropriate and risky in these situations, and it could lead to further abuse or even the death of a victimized woman.

*Do not facilitate couples' or marriage counseling, even when abuse is not occurring or suspected, without having appropriate qualifications.* Many Christian clergy and lay leaders admit to not having the proper credentials, education, or licensing to be considered as a couples' or marriage counselor. This requires a high level of skill and training most clergy and lay ministers do not possess. Nevertheless, a number of spiritual leaders and laity engage in what is called "Christian counseling." It is prudent that we either obtain the necessary education and training to meet the standards of the counseling profession, or make referrals to those individuals who have already achieved this level of competence.

*Accompany a victim-survivor to court hearings.* The presence of spiritual leaders and laity, upon the request of a victim-survivor, at child-custody or protection-order hearings provides much-needed support to the battered woman and indicates to the entire community that we condemn domestic violence. This is true whether or not we are being asked to offer testimony.

*Do not accompany batterers to court hearings.* Men who hurt their female intimate partners will often ask Christian clergy and lay members of a congregation, especially other males, to accompany them to court hearings to "speak on their behalf." The alleged offenders are most often seeking our collusion. While we have a responsibility to provide spiritual care to perpetrators as well as victims-survivors, Christian leaders *and* laity must take extra caution as to not be manipulated. We should not participate in any actions that help violators escape accountability and justice.

*Maintain healthy boundaries.* No single person, not even individuals who



have worked against sexual and domestic violence for decades, has the knowledge and training to deal alone with all the complexities associated with these pervasive problems. Members of faith communities and all others seeking to help victims and survivors must therefore not go beyond their level of training. Otherwise, we will end up causing more harm than good and might even further endanger the lives of a victim-survivor and her children, and even our own lives. To be most effective, spiritual leaders and lay congregation members need to partner with and make referrals to community service providers: advocates, batterers' intervention specialists, child protective services providers, crisis intervention counselors, law enforcement officers, legal professionals, shelter workers, and victim and witness assistance personnel, to name just a few. In addition, we all need to take added caution so as not to foster an emotionally dependent or sexual relationship with a victimized woman. Bear in mind, a victim-survivor is very vulnerable.

*Help a victim-survivor to establish a safety plan.* Spiritual leaders and church members can assist a victim-survivor by helping her establish a safety plan that can be implemented quickly should her husband's or boyfriend's abuse continue or escalate. Include in this plan a safety kit, kept in a place where the perpetrator will not discover it, that contains items such as cash, a change of clothing, toiletries, an extra photo identification card, copies of her children's birth certificates and childhood immunizations, and a list of phone numbers of counselors, friends, pastors, physicians, and shelters. It bears repeating: although spiritual leaders and laity can offer vital assistance to a victim-survivor in the area of safety planning, we must always work with a team of community service providers to offer a victim-survivor the best possible opportunities for safety.

*Be wary of modern day technology and telephone landlines.* Computers and cell phones are not safe ways to communicate with victims

and survivors. Often, offenders have placed spyware on an abused woman's computer. This enables him to track the woman's emails, and her Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other accounts. Similar tracking devices can easily be installed on cell phones. Even telephone landline communication is not safe because these conversations can also be tapped. When speaking with a victim or survivor by either cell phone or landline, be very general. But

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**To be effective in helping victims-survivors and perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, spiritual leaders and lay congregation members need to partner with and make referrals to community service providers.**

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instead, whenever possible, meet with an abused woman in person.

Finally, *seek education and training*. If members of faith communities are to take a vital part in helping victims-survivors and perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence, then it is essential that they seek proper and ongoing education and training. We must keep updated on the articles, books, videos, and workshops that can help us become effective team members. Remember: even with this training never try to care for a victim, survivor, or batterer alone.

Victims and survivors of domestic violence and spiritual abuse are found in every segment of society. Some attend worship regularly; sing in our choirs, teach in our parochial and Sunday school classes, and preach from our pulpits. So do their offenders. Christian pastors and congregation lay members need to acknowledge this harsh truth and acquire appropriate education and training in order to help address these epidemics that are devastating individuals and destroying families.

#### **NOTE**

† I treat these matters in further detail in *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, second edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011); *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002); and *Ending Violence in Teen Dating Relationships: A Resource Guide for Parents and Pastors* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).

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# The Disturbing Work of Resurrection

BY WALT DRAUGHON

**Following the shooting death of an African American teenager during a traffic stop in the Midtown area of St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1996, a congregation led a fifteen-year movement to build meaningful, cross-cultural relationships with the people and congregations of the neighborhood.**

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**F**ollowing the shooting and death of an African American teenager during a traffic stop in the fall of 1996, the city of St. Petersburg, Florida, experienced what the national media described as “chaotic and sweeping race riots.” I had been the Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of St. Petersburg for one month.

The day after the first “riot,” I drove into Midtown where the shooting had occurred—a population block of approximately forty thousand people, which was a veritable seedbed of gang activity, poverty, and violence. The carnage from the night before continued to burn with a “societal heat” that laid bare the obvious: the death of a teenager, while tragic, as not the only fatality of that dark night. In a real sense, our entire city, the seventeenth largest in the United States, had “died.” Fragile relationships had been severed; accusation was the majority response, and blame was the weapon of choice. We, all of us, were in need of resurrection. I, along with many others in our city, was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

“All we have to do,” I said to myself, “is talk this thing out. I will schedule a few meetings of church and civic leaders, provide a platform for the right people to ‘be heard,’ and voila, a resurrection we will have! Jesus himself commissioned us to ‘raise the dead’ (Matthew 10:7-8a), didn’t he? Really,

how difficult can it be?"

The years ahead, however, would prove to be educational. Trained in the disciplines and literature of theology, I had yet to learn – intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally (that is, behaviorally) – the large differences between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, between doctrine and ethics, between credo as profession and credo as expression. As I led our congregation through multiple victories and failures, I returned again and again to the story of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus in John's Gospel. Gradually, painstakingly, I was able to find and "take my own place" in that text – a discipline which, I believe, is the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation. There, in the company of those weeping, puzzled, skeptical people, I shed *my own* tears, asked *my own* questions, identified *my own* doubts, prayed *my own* prayers, and shouted (repeatedly) with *my own* voice, "Lazarus / St. Petersburg, come out!" In that amazing story and in St. Petersburg I learned that from start to finish, resurrection is "disturbing work" indeed.



After Lazarus fell ill, his sisters Mary and Martha sent for his dear friend, Jesus. But Jesus delayed coming for two days, and Lazarus died. The Gospel of John describes the scene in Bethany when Jesus finally arrived:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

...When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed<sup>1</sup> in spirit and deeply moved.<sup>2</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked

upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

*John 11:21-27, 32-44*



For fifteen years, we worked to build meaningful, cross-cultural relationships with the people and congregations of Midtown. In the process, our own church demography morphed radically: in 1996, our adult membership was 100% Caucasian American, 85% of whom were college-educated; in 2011, our adult membership was 70% Caucasian American, 25% African American, and 5% Other American, 55% of whom were college-educated. In other words, we began to "look like" our mission arena, Tampa Bay. As we built cross-cultural and interracial bridges, we learned much. Here is a sampling.

We learned that *large, "signal" events do communicate the resurrection-vision*. The pastor of the largest African American church in the city and I became close friends. His church was located in Midtown. In 1997, after much planning, First Baptist Church

rented St. Pete's largest downtown auditorium, a "neutral site." On a summer Resurrection Day, both congregations shut their church doors and came together for worship. Our choirs and music leadership were on the platform, not juxtaposed but interspersed, like salt and pepper on mashed potatoes. My friend was our preacher, and I led in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Problem was, when

we stepped out from the presidium to begin the service, our two congregations were there, yes, but they had segregated themselves — one church on one side of the auditorium, and one church on the other! Immediately, I stepped to the podium and explained that we were gathered to witness a resurrection: "So, rise up! Meet someone whose skin color does not match yours, learn his or her name, and ask if you might sit with him or her for the

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**I was able to "take my own place" in the story of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus. With those weeping, puzzled, skeptical people, I shed my tears, identified my doubts, prayed my prayers, and shouted (repeatedly), "Lazarus / St. Petersburg, come out!"**

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next hour and a half!" Pointing at the choir on the stage, I said, "You need to look like this!"

*Individual, personal relationships carry systemic power to heal.* Their whole is greater than the sum of their parts. At that first worship gathering of the two congregations (we scheduled others over the following years), new relationships were born and dormant ones were awakened. The word

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**If you want to build bridges across racial and cultural boundaries, you have to "go to church" together. Mark it down! There is no substitute for the healing power of God's people at worship!**

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spread. Two large groups of people, separated by suspicion, rejection, and accusation, met that day — one from Midtown, the other from the north side; one black, the other predominantly white — and they not only "got along," they actually laughed and embraced! Though, characteristically, there was little media attention, the word spread anyway. Indeed, we became "the talk of the town."

*If you want to build bridges across racial and cultural boundaries, you have to "go to church" together.* Mark it down! There is no substitute for the healing power of God's people at worship! In 2011, while I was in Phoenix, Arizona, for a meeting, I received a phone call saying two police officers and one troubled man had been shot and killed in Midtown. Slightly more than a month later, a young Midtown teenager shot and killed yet another officer. The teenager was sentenced to life in prison.

First Baptist hosted the funerals for the police officers. More than ten thousand people gathered for each of the funerals, and this time, the national media did its job. News teams reported and the Internet streamed clips, headlines, and even live video of the services. For more than a year, I received calls and e-mails from around the world, from Canada to South Africa. Most were from police officers; many were concerned about their spiritual lives and destinies. Still, with four more dead and one in prison, it was glaringly apparent that our resurrection-efforts were falling short.

In consultation with a small group of First Baptist Church leaders, we formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that applied for and received IRS authority for tax-deductible donations, and took our places at the mouth of Lazarus's tomb with a new plan. In a few months, *Rise Up, St. Pete!* (RUSP!) was off and running. With a steering team recruited from Midtown and the north side of St. Pete, our congregation hosted several meetings of governmental, civic, community, and religious leaders from Midtown. We listened, compiled the data, and agreed on two major principles. First, societal healing

takes place only by the formation and maintenance of personal relationships across schisms. In other words, when it comes to people and people-groups, fusion is the best remedy for fission. And second, the most effective means by which to lead people and people-groups from segregation into integration is a shared mission.

Time and again we have seen that when two entities – even violently disparate ones – agree that a well-defined task is necessary or beneficial to their respective lives, that the task can be accomplished only in partnership with the other, and that each of their voices will have import in both the design and implementation of the task-plan, and then each entity behaves in ways that contribute to the realization of the plan, *healing happens*. Somehow, the work of common mission – in this case, the “disturbing work of resurrection” – functions as a type of relational glue. When everything is said and done, it is difficult to throw rocks at a friend.

The RUSP! steering team identified various Midtown challenges to resurrection, such as job development and training; health care acquisition; parental, filial, and marital counseling; provision of food; domicile renovations to meet city code requisites; public education support; and so on. Finally, we formed action teams comprised of co-leaders and workers from each side of the schism, and we went to work. Again, we learned much.

*Expect a strong pull toward equilibrium, back to the previous status quo.* In my younger days, I had viewed these types of people as “the opposition.” But that was before I had spent more than a decade with Jesus and the crowd at Lazarus’s tomb. As I now see it, every system – whether comprised of people, pipes, or penguins – wants the safety and security of widespread adherence to predictable norms. The problem is that resurrection not only *emerges* from “disturbance,” it also *causes* “disturbance.” On more than a few occasions, serious people from both inside and outside our congregation attempted to convince me that RUSP! was draining our resources, retarding our growth, doomed to fail, and so on. While some offered helpful counsel, most were simply frightened. Midtown, heretofore “out of sight and mind,” was now regularly “among us!” “Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!”<sup>3</sup>

*Most people, even concerned, invested people, prefer objectification over obedience, definition over devotion, analysis over action.* We human beings tend to substitute “talk” for “walk.” I learned always to conclude conversations and meetings with a simple question: “Now, what are you going to do?” Then, and this is key, I waited until each person identified and committed to a particular action.

*Return, again and again, to the veracity of your commission.* Resurrections are almost never quiet. People are incessantly talking, especially about the one who demanded that the stone be rolled away from the tomb! However, the murmurs of the crowd, while sometimes hurtful, can function profitably – namely, when you allow them to drive you back to the “great disturbance” of the beginning, there to fine-tune and ratify your understanding

of and commitment to God's resurrection-call.

*Dream, design, and act with a view to repeatability.* As RUSP! progressed, we encountered more good ideas than we could process, much less implement. In our efforts to cope with multiple action-ideas, we landed on what came to be a valuable metric-question: given that we can dream it, design it, and implement it, can we *repeat* it? Societal resurrections, we discovered, ride on repetition. Many are the folks and entities who engage challenges among people-groups but soon are nowhere to be found; their absence becomes toxic to the personal relationships on which resurrection pivots!

*Resurrection is and will continue to be an unfinished work, until Jesus comes again.* Ever thought about the high probability that Old Lazarus not only "limped" out of that tomb, but also died again? The same is true in the case of societal resurrections. Most of Midtown's challenges continue to this day. In 2015, the year after my retirement from First Baptist Church and relocation to North Carolina, RUSP! leaders and I decided to dissolve the non-profit. Our time had come, and gone.

Was it worth it? Well, for my money, a "limping Lazarus" trumps a "dead Lazarus" every day of the week! Question is, what are *you* going to *do*? Somewhere, most likely close by, there is a "tomb" with your name on it. *Get to it.* Amen. So be it.

## NOTES

1 The Greek root *embrimaomai* means to snort in expression of rage, to become indignant, angry, or furious.

2 The Greek root *tarassó* means to stir up, to disturb.

3 This is the worried refrain of Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow on the Yellow Brick Road through the woods before they gather their "courage," the Cowardly Lion, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

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# American Religions and War

BY SARAH KOENIG

Examining the key conflicts in U.S. history, these books bring into sharp relief how frequently Americans have equated their government's military aims with God's will. They invite us to contend more soberly with Americans' long love affair with holy war motifs.

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Americans do not like to think of the United States as a nation that engages in holy war. The term conjures visions of the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or, if we are looking for a Christian comparison, the Crusades. The underlying sense is that holy wars are something that other people do: medieval Christians, or present-day radical Islamists. The term "holy war" thus serves to mark the wars of others as irrational, primitive, and fanatical, while casting American state violence as rational, modern, and religiously enlightened.

The four books reviewed here challenge this assumption about Americans and war. Through examinations of key state and extra-state conflicts in U.S. history, these books bring into sharp relief how frequently Americans have equated their government's military aims with the will of God. Religiously motivated violence has played an important role in our history: we might say that it is coded into our national DNA. Admittedly, these texts illumine how Americans have found hope and redemption within times of violent struggle, and how religious convictions have motivated Americans to protest war and other forms of violence. However, they also invite us to contend more soberly with Americans' long love affair with holy war motifs.

## RELIGION, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

John Carlson and Jonathan Ebel's *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, 250 pp., \$34.99) provides a broad theoretical and historical overview for thinking about American ideas of religious violence. This edited collection explores

case studies ranging from Puritan wars against Native Americans in the seventeenth century to the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007; there are examinations of racial and gendered violence and explorations of the ethics of war. The wide-ranging essays are united by the conviction that exploring the intersections of American religion and violence provides “crucial insight into the meaning behind ‘America’ – its history, ideals, character, identity, sense of purpose, and place in the world” (p. 2).

Carlson and Ebel set the tone of the collection with a provocative and highly readable theoretical introduction. They set out the terms “jeremiad” and “jihad” as two ways to understand ideological formations of religion and violence in America. The term “jeremiad,” a reference to the biblical prophet Jeremiah, refers to “a biblically rooted, sustained lament about a nation or people and their failure to live up to divinely ordained ideals” (p. 10). While a lament in form, the jeremiad also proclaims a vision of what a people are, should be, or can be. American jeremiads, from the Puritans to the present, have thus served as a powerful mode of social unification as well as critique. “Jihad,” often used by non-Muslims to conjure specters of Islamist violence, has a broader and more theoretically useful definition in Carlson and Ebel’s formulation. They note that the term means “effort” or “exertion” in Arabic – in other words, struggle that may be, but is not necessarily, violent in nature (p. 10). The pairing of these terms is intentional. Carlson and Ebel want their readers to recognize that jeremiads and jihads are not so different: both are modes of religious understanding that have the potential to catalyze violence. Using these terms broadly and analytically can mitigate the tendency to set Islamic violence apart from other forms of religious violence. Singling out Islamic violence as qualitatively different can obscure the multiple ways that violence has been religiously motivated and religiously justified in U.S. history. As these essays show us, American Christians have appealed often to divine providence to justify violence against those deemed to be outside the fold. American Christian violence has typically fallen hardest on marginalized peoples – American Indians, African Americans, and religious outsiders. Christianity also provides a wealth of resources for resisting, re-imagining, and redeeming violent events, however, and this collection points toward some of those possibilities: pacifism, just war theory, and critiques of practices like torture.

### **THE CIVIL WAR AS A NATIONAL SACRIFICE**

At least 620,000 Americans died in the Civil War – and both Union and Confederate partisans believed that they were doing the Lord’s work. Harry S. Stout’s *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2007, 576 pp., \$18.00) explores the paradox that Abraham Lincoln identified in his second inaugural address: “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other” (p. 426).

Stout argues that the Civil War's unprecedented casualties were enabled and justified by a burgeoning civil religion that depicted the war as a holy sacrifice that would purify and strengthen the American nation. Both the Union and the Confederacy created ritual structures to strengthen their side's moral vision and sense of divine calling. They celebrated fallen soldiers as martyrs, designated special days of prayer and fasting, and preached in sermons and speeches that God was on their side. Though Stout searched for dissenting voices among the clergy, he found that religious leaders on both sides were "virtually cheerleaders all" for the righteousness of their side's cause and the sureness of their side's victory (p. xvii). Abraham Lincoln was one of the few public voices that approached the conflict from a more nuanced perspective. In the war's later years, he increasingly invoked divine Providence, but "without the self-righteous evangelical piety that went along with so much patriotism in the North and the South" (p. 145).

Although Lincoln refused to adhere to the religious models of those around him, he still oversaw the Union's escalation from limited to total war. Lincoln's grim calculation, according to Stout, was that the Union would eventually win a war of attrition due to its larger population. The goal of emancipation provided moral justification for the Union's shifts, first, toward a war of attrition, and second, to a war that targeted civilians' homes, food supplies, and

property. After the war, the U.S. army applied these tactics in a new setting – against Plains Indians defending their homelands (p. 325).

While recognizing emancipation as an unequivocal moral good, Stout encourages us to contemplate how even moral causes can be used to justify immoral activities. He also asks us to contend with the profound confidence that Christians felt toward their own side's cause, even when

it necessitated killing fellow Christians or flouting typical war practices. When it comes to war, American civil religion, Stout suggests, has often trumped confessional religions.

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**Christians felt profound confidence toward their side's cause in the Civil War, even when it necessitated killing fellow Christians or flouting typical war practices. During war, Harry Stout notes, American civil religion has often trumped confessional religions.**

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## **THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS HOLY WAR**

Whereas the Civil War has been depicted as a grand national sacrifice, the First World War is often portrayed as a moment of grand religious disillusionment, in which Americans' dreams of progressive reform were crushed

by the cruel machinery of trench warfare. Historian Philip Jenkins argues otherwise in *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014, 448 pages, \$15.99). In his sweeping study of religious attitudes during the war, he finds not disillusionment but intensification and transformation. The war, Jenkins tells us, was nothing less than a “global religious revolution” (p. 5). It resulted in dramatic

realignments of national boundaries and political theologies that reverberate to the present.

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**In his sweeping study of religious attitudes during World War I, Philip Jenkins finds not disillusionment but intensification and transformation. The war, he tells us, was nothing less than a “global religious revolution” that reverberates to the present.**

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Jenkins makes two important contributions to understanding Americans’ relationships to religion and violence. First, he shows us that many American Christians, Jews, spiritualists, and others did not lose their religion in the fires of World War I. Rather, they found new ways of making sense of faith in light of war. Some

threw their energies wholeheartedly behind a narrative of holy war, aided by propaganda images of crucified Allied soldiers and a demonic Kaiser Wilhelm. Jenkins reminds us that this propaganda was successful precisely because it exploited existing ideas of “cosmic confrontation,” of a final battle between good and evil (p. 111). Others found new ways to cope with death and destruction, pouring their energies into spiritualist and mystical religious practices. Religion changed, but it was not abandoned. What did change for many Christians was their confidence in Christendom as a model for right religion and politics. As European and American Christians made sense of the horrors of the war and the shifting borders of the Christian world, they also “had to abandon the traditional thought world of Christendom to return to their own resources, spiritual and intellectual” (p. 23). Neo-orthodoxy, Pentecostalism, and millennialism flourished in the war’s wake, as American and European Christians searched for new ways of understanding church and state and African and Asian peoples embraced the liberating and anti-colonial potential of indigenous expressions of Christianity.

Second, Jenkins demonstrates that American Christians were not alone in viewing the First World War as a holy war. All the Christian-majority nations involved depicted their cause as the cause of Christ. But Muslim nations also saw the war as a momentous religious event that brought an end to Christian-Muslim coexistence in places like the Ottoman Empire, Greece, and Syria, and resulted in the collapse of the last earthly caliphate.

(Jenkins writes before ISIS launched its horrifically violent quest to reestablish a caliphate, but readers will no doubt make the connection.) Jews also experienced the war in profoundly religious ways. In the U.S. and Europe, Jews' hopes of combating anti-Semitism through patriotic service were dashed, and mystical and Zionist expressions of Judaism experienced resurgence. Jenkins's analysis encourages American Christians to better understand the world-shifting consequences of war rhetoric.

### **THE RELIGION OF SOLDIERS AND WAR WORKERS**

Jonathan Ebel's *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 272 pp., \$22.95) examines the First World War through a more intimate look at how American soldiers and other war workers invoked religion to make sense of the conflict. Whereas nations often use government propaganda to construct a unified war narrative, Ebel demonstrates that the religious experiences of everyday people were far more idiosyncratic, incorporating culturally mediated understandings of "faith, citizenship, and manhood" (p. 2). Soldiers' and war workers' experiences often confirmed their assumptions that right religion was expressed through struggle, suffering, and action, including violent action. Some soldiers saw the war as a means of personal redemption through brave and selfless national service. Others believed that their service would repair U.S. society, redeeming it from racism, sexism, and ethnocentricity, or from the dangers of diversity and pluralism.

But the war also confounded soldiers' progressive interpretations by upending all expectations of order or reason. As they repeatedly witnessed seemingly senseless deaths of friends and comrades juxtaposed to near misses and miraculous survivals, many soldiers developed a fatalistic streak. For non-religious soldiers, a capricious, personified fate served as a kind of deity, while religious soldiers often appealed to divine providence. Frequently, soldiers held these two notions – the cold workings of fate and the mysterious workings of God – in tension. But whether soldiers referred to these forces as "God, Fate, chance, [or] luck," the war "gave [soldiers] a taste of the radical subordination of individuals to higher powers," which complicated appeals to muscular Christianity (p. 63).

While the previous texts focus largely on how Americans have marshaled religious language to justify war, Ebel reminds us that the rhetoric of political and religious leaders does not necessarily represent the experiences of everyday people. Nevertheless, most of the people Ebel depicts remained relatively confident in the war's essential rightness. Even within the varied stories of soldiers and war workers, there was a broad consensus that America was right to enter the war, and that soldiers were right to fight and die in it. Many Americans saw soldiers' deaths as salvific in and of themselves, irrespective of any prior religious faith (p. 97). While "the Great War was not a war of religion," religion made Americans' involvement possible (p. 194).

It provided soldiers with ways of coping with senseless violence, language and symbols to make sense of death and suffering, and, perhaps most importantly, a model of masculine Christianity that made soldiering a noble and Christian calling.

### **CONCLUSION: HUMILITY, MERCY, AND JUSTICE**

Not all American Christians have supported wars wholeheartedly or uncritically. Yet the ease with which Christians have entered into state-sanctioned and extra-institutional violent conflict should give us pause. These books serve as a call to theological humility: we must recognize that despite our sincere efforts to fight for just causes, we have a difficult time separating nationalist aims and self-righteous crusades from genuine justice. Whether we are advocates of total pacifism, just war, or something in between, we must keep in mind that all killing results in the destruction of people created in God's image. Our jeremiads and jihads typically result in something less than God's justice, and certainly less than God's mercy. Reckoning with America's martial past, and the ways in which Christianity has made this past possible, can help us be better stewards of our theological visions, political voices, and responsibilities toward both those we ask to go to war and those we label as our enemies.

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# What Kind of Religion Is Safe for Society?

BY DAVID CLOUTIER

**Behind the debate about violence and religion lurks the question of how to evaluate our advanced society. Is it basically benign, or devoted to world hegemony? The three books reviewed here help clarify the central issues.**

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In the midst of the 2016 U.S. presidential primary, a curious phenomenon emerged. On the one hand, Americans saw a Republican contender forthrightly argue for a ban on Muslim visitors as a potential preventative measure in the wake of terrorist attacks, while at the same time, Democrats refused even to use the label “Muslim” for the groups perpetuating such violence, refusing to acknowledge that the violence was “religious” at all, and implicitly insisting that “true” religion is peaceful and good.

This exchange exemplifies how confused questions of religion and violence have become. The three books reviewed here offer three different approaches for dealing more carefully with the connections between violence and religion. The first is a moderate defense of “good” religion from a formerly-atheist philosopher. The second defends a traditional Christianity of peace, recognizing its historical failures but redoubling efforts to commit to its basic beliefs. The third challenges the whole idea of a timeless, ahistorical category of “religion” supposedly connected to violence, instead arguing that the “myth” of such violence is in fact a way of excusing violence by “secular” ideologies. In this review, I commend all the books for their ability to avoid the oversimplifications of popular discourse, and identify two key questions at the heart of the debate. I conclude by returning to the situation of 2016, to see how each book challenges the terms of the public debate.

Keith Ward’s *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 206 pp., \$16.00) squarely responds to the popular polemics of

the New Atheists such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. One of their common contentions is that religion is irrational and promotes violence, but Ward suggests these writers “refuse to investigate the question [of religion] in a properly rigorous way and substitute rhetoric for analysis...just what they tend to accuse religious believers of doing” (p. 7).

Ward begins by outlining the complexity of what counts as a religion, but the bulk of his analysis rests on two main points. First, *any* human phenomenon can become dangerous. Thus, the proper question to ask is not whether “religion” is inherently dangerous, but rather “what makes people pull [dangerous beliefs] out and make them decisive” for religious adherents, “for it is not anything in the religion itself that makes them do so” (p. 36). The logic of the connection is more complicated. For Ward, the cause of “dangerous” religion is not belief systems themselves, but rather some social oppression that allows groups to appeal to aspects of the religion as a kind of veil for the violence they advocate (p. 54). Again, Ward points out that any human phenomenon – such as patriotic nationalism or Marxism – is susceptible to this same pattern of corruption. In fact, religions may be in a better position, because the appeal to the complex religious tradition enables internal critique. In confronting violence done in the name of religion, then, Ward insists what is needed is to identify the real grievances of the group and then to encourage real education in the tradition, in order to unearth internal critiques (pp. 61-62). Second, Ward believes that religion “has often been the voice of moderation and reconciliation, and that is its true role, as scriptural documents of all the great world religions clearly state” (p. 81). Thus, the second half of the book is devoted to defending this “true role” by explaining how religion serves as a foundation for moral convictions about goodness and how even empirical studies suggests the benefits of religion, understood properly.

These two parts of Ward’s case stand in some tension with one another. On the one hand, he insists throughout on the necessity of appreciating the complexity and context of any given expression of religion: “The lesson is: do not generalise in abstract terms. See religious movements in their historical and social context” (p. 49). On the other hand, Ward’s book moves slowly but clearly to a case for a certain sort of religious belief as “true.” Near the end of the book, he outlines the major world religions, arguing that they all point toward “a developed conception of goodness and a deepening perception of the spiritual as the realm of the supremely good” (p. 181). Religions must be humble about their specifics, noting the need for believers to be “self-critical” and “open and responsive to the things that make for true reverence for the Supreme Good and for true human fulfillment” (p. 196). It seems obvious to him what “humane and liberal values” are, so much so that he claims, when discussing usury, that “no Christian today would dream of condemning lending at interest as immoral” (p. 50).





Insofar as he is speaking to today's choir of cultured despisers of religion, Ward's generalized spirituality is attractive. However, Christians like those represented in *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007 [2003], 256 pp., \$28.00), the collection of essays edited by Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, might be more wary. The anthology responds positively to Ward's first point while forthrightly rejecting his second. A number of essays in the collection do exactly the close contextualizing work that Ward recommends, analyzing events like the Crusades and the conquest of the Americas carefully to understand the complex role Christian belief played. Yet the collection opposes Ward's spiritualized definition of true religion; each of the authors in the final theological section "constructs his theological argument through a commitment to Christian uniqueness and absoluteness" (p. 16), rejecting the idea that critiquing religious violence means softening commitments to exclusiveness or to certain doctrinal commitments, such as the redemptive significance of the atonement.

For example, Richard Mouw argues that even the images of God's wrath and judgment, if understood properly, actually can call us to peace. But Mouw crucially notes that too often, the "satisfaction of God's wrath" is understood simply through the bloody, physical violence of the cross, when in fact Jesus' "suffering in the flesh" is understood to run throughout his life, and consists most of all in radical abandonment, not violence. It is in taking this radical separation of God on himself that Christ "makes it possible for us to find a new kind of reconciled unity...out of the unity of the Godhead" (p. 171). This is the unity of God that is ultimately stronger than anything the world can throw at it, even stronger than death. In the concluding essays of this collection, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank push each other's positions to explore the extent to which we can (or must) practice this ontological peace. But both authors, like Mouw, presume that this peace lies at the heart of all things, and is made accessible through the particularity of Christ. "He is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14a).



The essays in *Must Christianity Be Violent?* set up the even-stronger claims made by William T. Cavanaugh in *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 296 pp., \$56.00). Cavanaugh begins his deconstruction of "the myth of religious violence" by noting, like Ward, the sloppiness of the concept "religion," but his argument then turns to a more serious charge. It is not simply, as Ward suggests, that all human ideologies can be dangerous, but that the particular accusation against "religion" actually serves to shield and legitimate "non-religious" violence. Cavanaugh explains,

The myth of religious violence tries to establish as timeless, universal, and natural a very contingent set of categories – religious and secular – that are in fact constructions of the modern West. Those who do not accept these categories as timeless, universal, and natural are subject to coercion. (p. 6)

While his argument is largely negative, it serves an important purpose, unmasking the supposed “obviousness” of the religion-violence connection.

Cavanaugh makes three crucial points. First, the myth’s foundations are not very compelling, either historically (in terms of supposed “wars of religion”) or conceptually (in terms of a supposed “transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion essentially separate from politics” [p. 9]). Throughout the text, Cavanaugh exhaustively documents how all attempts to separate “religion” as a category are conceptually inadequate, at best reducing religion to a certain definition of something private, non-rational, and optional.

Then why does this “myth,” despite its flimsiness, have so much cultural power? This is Cavanaugh’s second crucial point: it serves to legitimate the monopoly on violence claimed by the modern nation-state, so as to contain forms of life “labeled” as religious. As he notes,

The religious-secular dichotomy...sanctions the condemnation of certain kinds of violence and the overlooking of other kinds of violence.... [W]hile it delegitimizes certain kinds of violence, it is used to legitimate other kinds of violence, namely, violence done in the name of secular, Western ideals. (p. 16)

The myth’s actual content is designed to serve a particular configuration of power: to “create public space for the smooth functioning of state and market interests” (p. 121).

Finally, this myth becomes operationalized in public policies with pernicious results. Domestically, these policies arbitrarily marginalize certain belief systems in favor of others. Internationally, they justify violence against certain “others” who are deemed “fanatical” because of their supposed refusal to understand religion as private and interior – that is, in the way our culture does.



What is really at stake in these three arguments, which do overlap but also emphasize different, sometimes contradictory, things? I think we see a disagreement on what might be called the “background characterization” of existing Western societies. Much of the power of Cavanaugh’s argument rests on the core recognition that supposedly peace-loving, secular societies are in fact deeply implicated in violence. In the Chase and Jacobs collection, John Milbank’s concluding essay makes this point by going beyond Cavanaugh’s example of Western violence against Islamic societies. Milbank describes the

violence of our society not simply in terms of its wars, but through all the ways it turns violence into a spectacle that fascinates and edifies the population. This recognition of pervasive violence marks a key contrast with Ward: for Milbank, everyday middle-class life is a “controllable economy of violence” offering “as much *simulated* violence as you like” (p. 190), which is supposed to eliminate real wars, but instead turns those “real” wars into spectacle. Such a claim is very far from Ward’s calm observations of “humane and liberal values” which “we” all share!

One wonders if Cavanaugh would view Ward’s book as a gentle but dangerous domestication of religions in service of the nation-state and personal fulfillment. The other two books do an admirable job of following Ward’s insistence on internal critique within particular traditions. After all, Cavanaugh admits, “I have no intention of excusing Christianity or Islam or any other set of ideas and practices from careful analysis. Given certain conditions, Christianity and Islam can and do contribute to violence” (p. 5). In the essay collection, theological conservatives like Mouw are willing to internally critique mistakenly bloody images of divine satisfaction, and writers like Milbank and Hauerwas are extremely critical of their own tradition’s complicity in violence. Perhaps this is really all Ward requires of any tradition.

However, what you *don’t* get is Ward’s alternative of a generalized spirituality at the heart of all traditions in their genuine form. This exposes the problem in Ward’s argument: genuine internal critique requires allegiance to the tradition, rather than an overriding generalized spirituality, aping the values of our own society.

Like the atheists he argues against, Ward’s argument is ultimately too simple. He thinks violent religion is always about some form of social oppression, and the cure is universal: judge all religions and their forms by a generalized sense of spiritual goodness, kindness, and pro-social altruism. If Ward actually wants careful context-driven analyses of religion and violence, he should let go of this oversimplified overlay, which ultimately seems to derive from the very overconfidence in the West’s current arrangements that Cavanaugh targets.

Though appearing open to the universal temptation of corruption, Ward nevertheless draws seemingly very confident lines between a basic culture of peace and the appearance of destructive distortions of that culture. He is

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**For John Milbank, everyday middle-class life is a “controllable economy of violence” offering “as much *simulated* violence as you like,” which is supposed to eliminate real wars, but instead turns those “real” wars into spectacle.**

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not overly impressed by the Enlightenment view that religion is a relic of the past, but he is largely supportive of Enlightenment-style religion. He is clear that there are certain phenomena – like Nazism, militarized nationalism, radicalized Islamic groups – which are truly “dangerous,” but also clearly distinguishable from “normal” life. For example, Ward offers a lengthy and detailed critique of the radical version of Islam offered by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), which forms the basis for fighting jihad against any society not totally governed by sharia law. On Ward’s reading, Qutb’s version of Islam is ironically “a form of Islamicized Marxism, a Muslim theology of liberation that has capitulated to a secular agenda” (p. 59). This may be a correct conclusion, but it trades on a confidence that our own viewpoint is benign.

Thus, the differences among the authors about the desirability of religious particularity comes back to the question of how one evaluates our advanced society. Is it basically benign? Or is such a view used, as Cavanaugh writes, to establish “a dichotomy between our peace-loving, secular reasonableness and their irrational religious fanaticism,” which actually veils our “religious devotion” to American hegemony (p. 205)? Resolving this question is difficult. In actuality, it is possible to understand Western life as *both* saturated by violence *and* remarkably peaceable, not least because the abstraction “Western life” covers many things, from Little League baseball to violent video games, from social work reaching across diverse communities to widespread gun violence.

And this is why a second key question should really be the focus: how should Christians live? However violent the systems are, what steps are necessary for us to act as genuine peacemakers, whether in our neighborhoods or in international conflicts? In this regard, the essays by Kenneth Chase and Glen Stassen in *Must Christianity Be Violent?* are most important. Chase insists Christians take seriously two theological principles in considering any appeals to violence, whether “religious” or “secular”: the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice and the justice of God’s ultimate judgment. Christianity makes these claims, yet we often do not operationalize them, extolling sacrifice for the nation-state and insisting on taking judgment into our own hands. Instead, we must practice humility, which often requires that we be more skeptical of calls to perform violence for supposedly necessary reasons. Correspondingly on the positive side, Stassen outlines “just peacemaking” theory, which requires Christians not simply to step back from violence on the basis of their claims about God and Christ’s work, but also to figure out alternative actions that can resolve real conflict. These rich essays portray most vividly why a genuine commitment to a peaceful Christianity is a more robust response to religious violence than Ward’s generalized appeals to humane values.

Still, approaching the absurd debate of 2016, we see that *all* our authors represent a more sophisticated way of engaging real issues. For Ward, yes, radicalized Islam is a form of religion, but a form of religion which is a secu-

larized corruption. However, a sufficiently complex characterization of this corruption—even on Ward’s view—is likely to indict the actions of Americans and Europeans in the Middle East, actions which leaders in the West avoid facing, in part, because Christians in their populations are not committed to the peacemaking principles highlighted by Stassen. Such an analysis, especially if it pays attention to our shared dependence on certain natural resources, suggests exactly the kind of hidden and legitimized nation-state violence that holds our daily lives together. For Ward, it seems, the decades-long history of the West’s complicity in the violence of the Middle East is an aberration from our “humane, liberal values”; for Cavanaugh and Milbank, it is simply the normal way nation-states operate. But either way, the analysis is an improvement on either condemnation of religion or denial of its role.

Cavanaugh’s perspective sheds additional light, since the 2016 debate illustrates two different ways in which the nation-state arrogates the right to police acceptable religion. One way is direct and even crass: simply label a certain religion as dangerous. However, the other way is also a form of policing: by withholding the label of “religion,” enlightened Western politicians get to define who deserves respect under the label, as well as who is denied the label, and thus can be subjected to justified violence.

But what should most concern us is the fact that this debate is carried on among politicians who are at least nominally Christian. From these candidates, we see nothing of Chase’s humility before God’s work nor Stassen’s commitment to alternative forms of conflict resolution. And maybe that is the most important thing we can learn from these books: when we hear sloppy speech about religion and violence, we need to ask, where are the Christians speaking about and acting for real peace out of their deepest faith convictions?



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