



Review of *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, Lee Griffith, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 399 pp.

By Wayne Northey

“What would this mean if it were true that we love God only as much as the person we love least? Would it not mean that, when we have finally won the victory in our war on terrorism, when we have finally managed to exterminate all the thugs and Hitlers and terrorists, we will have expressed nothing so much as our total confidence in the death of God? (p. 263)” This is the heart of Griffith’s sustained thesis that “the biblical concept of ‘the terror of God’ stands as a renunciation of all violence – and of death itself (inside front jacket cover).”

Most surprising about this book is its timing: “In an instant [after September 11, 2001], the phrase ‘the war on terrorism’ entered everyday discourse with a new and urgent meaning. In this book I do not seek to exploit that urgency. Indeed, the title of this book was chosen and the first draft was completed almost a full year before the events of September 11. With the exception of these two paragraphs at the beginning and a postscript at the end, the manuscript has not been altered to cover these most recent exchanges of terror and counterterror (p. ix).” In the very specific meaning of the term, I consider this book *providential*. It is also *prophetic* in the truest sense of that adjective: namely, a word from God to our present times.

Lee Griffith’s first book was published in 1993, and entitled: *The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Reflections on Prison Abolition*. *Christianity Today* magazine, despite its reflection of Evangelical Christianity’s captivity to mainstream American culture (see on this sociologist Alan Wolfe’s *The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2003)), voted it one of the best books of 1993. Both books are *tours de force*. Both are profoundly countercultural and deeply biblical in their analysis, in the best spirit of Paul’s admonition: “*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will* (Romans 12:2).” Both books are destined therefore to be resisted and ignored by the vast majority of us claiming to follow Christ. The author is a “teacher, author, and social activist currently working with a mental health program in Elmira, New York (inside back jacket cover).”

Griffith opened his first book with the memorable challenge: “The gospel is profoundly scandalous, and until we hear at least a whisper of its scandal, we risk not hearing any part of it (p. 1).” In *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), David McCracken follows Søren Kierkegaard in seeing Jesus and the Gospels as quintessential *scandal* and *offence*. Lee Griffith lays out the contours of this *scandalous offence* in the book under review with reference to violence and war. In “testing out God’s will” concerning “the war on terrorism” he confronts us with our profound addictions to lies and violence. It is up to us to “see” and change, “hear” and understand.

The book is structured with a Preface, a Postscript, and five sections. Given that the story of humanity can be understood as an endless stream of acts of terror and counterterror, or as Empire seeking to impose its will on all others, and “Empire striking back” (“counterempire”), there is no lack of historical material to choose from! In the course of the book, anti-Semitism, the “Christian” Crusades, slavery abolitionism, and the contrary paths of nonviolence by Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, and Desmond Tutu are amongst those events and people discussed. Each section begins with the “newspaper” of current events, goes on to a relevant case study from church history, and concludes with biblical/theological reflection. Though these three perspectives constantly reprise and intersect throughout.

The author writes in the Preface: “... I must acknowledge that what initially set me to writing was not an academic interest in questions of foreign policy or history or ethics. I was (and am) interested in protesting violence – all violence, but especially that violence which the governing authorities of the United States inflict in my name by means of the resources I provide to those authorities. I am made complicit in such violence... There can be no pretense to righteousness or lack of complicity. One can only confess – and protest (p. xi).” And so he does.

He points out that the US since World War II alone has been involved in “dozens of wars and invasions and covert interventions as well as uncounted bombing runs and missile attacks (p. xi).” In the most sustained, the Vietnam War, the lesson learned was to be quicker about the dirty work, so that protest does not build up. And God is invariably invoked in all these conflicts. He decries co-opting God to the service of carnage, and to One “who intervenes in history through warfare rather than... through resurrection and the renunciation of death (p. xii).” In “testing out God’s perfect will”, Griffith states: “Violence is inevitably a renunciation rather than an affirmation of the will and freedom of God (p. xiii).” And he employs the Bible to demythologize for him the contemporary most powerful cultural myth makers, those who pound the drums of war. The book is “arranged as a dialogue with newspaper, history, and Bible (p. xiii).”

In the first section Griffith posits the moral equivalency of (non-state) terrorist and (state-sanctioned) counterterrorist, underscoring Gil Bailie’s observation: “The growing sense of moral symmetry between the criminals and the cops corresponds to what Girard speaks of as the doubling effect of violence, the tendency of violence to erase all difference between the adversaries while at the same time enflaming the passions and causing the level of violence between them to escalate.... (*Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, New York: Crossroad, 1995, p. 64)” This was certainly the case with the notion of “just war”, a term Augustine of Hippo, an empire loyalist in the fourth and fifth centuries, introduced to Christendom, borrowing from Cicero. Augustine sadly was more an empire loyalist than a biblical follower of Jesus, and foisted on Western Christendom its most persistent and pernicious heresy (false choice): that one can actually “love your enemies” by spearing, shooting, executing and bombing them! This sophistry remains majority dogma for Christian believers to this day. Astounding!

“All violence is an attack upon community. All violence by Christians is also an attack upon the memory of Jesus (p. 48).”, Griffith contends in Section II. Likewise, Griffith asserts: “Violence is a form of proselytism which preaches that there is no God. The preachments of violence are more effective than televangelists, more zealous in winning converts than those who sell religion door to door. As we wait for God, terror surrounds us with a message offered as holy writ: ‘God is not.’ (p. 68).” While American evangelists preach Jesus, what they are clearly selling is American hegemony. And the message is not lost: it is better to become an American than a Christian if one would avoid American exported terror the world over.

Section III treats of ethical dualism. In particular, Griffith sees the US as self-righteous to the core, declaring all other nations or political interests “unjust” if opposed to America’s. Not only, that, but America repeatedly decries the “terrorism” of former massively subsidized allies such as Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Manuel Noriega, etc., etc., etc. He writes: “When there is a problem, America goes to war because the world is viewed as ripe for conquest rather than ripe for redemption (p. 76).” And those who have bought into this kind of self-righteousness (the vast majority of Americans, including Christians), do not wrestle with an “Ethical dualism [that poses] questions about how to avoid demonic actions oneself, but rather about how to oppose the demonic actions of others (p. 83).” And so, for instance, the US spends an obscenely disproportionate amount on weapons of mass destruction in order to rid the world of the same! “This is a portrait of addiction: The United States spends more on the military than the next fifteen nations *combined* (p. 84).” And one might add: it is many times over the world’s major arms dealer with the concomitant global terror that monstrous reality facilitates.

Griffith quotes Abraham Heschel that humanity’s greatest problem is not that of evil but of our relationship to God. And in that relationship, the “enemy” is the gatekeeper: “Though it is maddening, what I owe to God is intertwined with what I owe to my enemy. And the hope too is intertwined. Hope is not possible for me unless it is also possible for the most demonic of my adversaries (p. 125).”

So just what is the “terror of God”, is the burden of Section IV. It is, to begin with, not according to the “court theologies” of historian Eusebius or theologian Augustine, and their myriad imitators. In their biblical perversions, orthodoxy poses no threat to empire, whereas the biblical texts bristle with it! And the doctrine of hell, one of eternal conscious torment for the unrepentant, was a key orthodox doctrine that “... kept the rabble in line (p. 175).” Hence, the doctrine of hell, which in traditional orthodoxy is a doctrine of terror, elicited a “... homiletics of terror (p. 176).”, as exemplified in Jonathan Edwards of the First Great American Awakening, and a host of imitators. In premillenarian teachings of the “rapture” (where all true believers get out of harm’s way before, literally, all hell breaks loose on earth), “... the saints are akin to an audience at a horror movie, floating at a safe distance while being thrilled by scenes of the terror suffered by others. Both military superpowers and the raptured righteous claim the right to float unscathed above a world of suffering humanity (p. 178).” “Theological terrorists [purveyors of traditional doctrines of hell and more recent extra-biblical inventions like

the “rapture”] claim that the war is at the behest of God and that God will rescue them from this world on which they war (p. 179).”

So what is the terror of God? “It is upon the least lovable people that God heaps the burning coals of love (Romans 12:20 – 21). This is the terror of God. This is the fire of hell, the eternal torment. Those who would reject all love are forced to endure it...

“It is God who crosses the chasm. It is God who decides to go to hell armed with the burning coals of love...

“This is the terror of God from which we cannot hide because, in Jesus, God invades not only the earth but hell itself. God is the one who decides to go to hell. Hallelujah and amen (pp. 184 & 185).”

There is an extended treatment of John’s “Revelation”, which, in Griffith’s reading claims that “Every drop of blood that is shed confirms [all empires’] ultimate defeat, confirms that their fate is already sealed (p. 211).” And all empires great and small, past and present, are built upon bloodshed: “You must never look too closely at the making of sausages or empires. You will be repulsed (p. 204).” Like the dog’s nose rubbed in its own feces, John the Revealer does just that to all empires. Reflecting the biblical understanding, Griffith notes: “All nations bear the mark of the Beast. It is only the idolizing of the nation itself that could lead Americans or any other people to believe that their nation is exempt in this regard (p. 215).” Then he quotes from *Unveiling Empire* (Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Orbis Books, 1999, p. 183): “In the Bible, there is really only one story: that of a people struggling to leave empire behind and set out to follow God (p. 215).”

He completes this section with two personal experiences. One was listening to a commencement address by William Stringfellow at a theological college, which was a “renunciation of all triumphalism, be it academic, ecclesiastical, economic, political, or military (p. 216).” Griffith continues: “It was a reminder that the saints are not raptured out of terror and into victory. It was a reminder that Easter is preceded by the cross, that God’s cause is not served by the righteous who are triumphant but by the faithful who are defeated (p. 216).”

The final section seeks to take one “Beyond Terror and Counterterror”. Griffith states: “The greatest concession to terrorism is mimesis, and it is also the most frequent concession (p. 220).” In other words, all violence, as Jacques Ellul contended, is imitative and not original. Invariably, one, a nation, all, become what is hated. “You have defeated us Nazis”, declared one war criminal to the Allied prosecutors at Nuremberg, “but the spirit of Nazism rises like a Phoenix amongst you.” This in particular is the burden of the brilliant research of René Girard, namely the unmasking of this kind of universal imitative violence. In the words of one Girardian interpreter: “[Girard] accomplishes this revelation by applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to social phenomena... The scapegoat mechanism is one side of the great either/or of human existence: either a society will sacrifice victims to meet the psychological needs arising

out of its ‘ontological sickness,’ [Kierkegaard’s term] or human beings will follow the way of the Kingdom of God, which is the way of love of the neighbor (*The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*, Charles K. Bellinger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 79).”

Griffith calls ultimately, for imitation of Christ: “Rather than peddling fears and threats of damnation, the church is called to witness to the one and only sufficient antidote to terror – the resurrection of Jesus... the ministry of the church is not to preach and practice fear, but to preach and practice the defeat of death – indeed, to preach and to practice the reconciliation that has already been accomplished by God (p. 251).” Griffith cites three Christ-imitators in the church (Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu), from the three major divisions of Christendom, as mentioned above, to illustrate this call.

Griffith sums up this section: “In effect, the resurrection is God’s war on the terrorism of both guerrilla bands and nation states (p. 269).”

The postscript deconstructs the most widely stated commentary on September 11: *our world has changed forever*. On the contrary, states Griffith, apart from the Western cultural centrism that views this event as the greatest of all disasters to befall the 21st century so far (what amazing cultural hubris!), nothing with relation to terror and counterterror has changed, nothing at all. He provides a long litany of ways in which “there was no change”. “And so the anguish of September 11 is only compounded by this realization of how very little has changed. Despair attends the awareness that we are confronted not by a new story but by a story which is very old – as old as the slaughter of the innocents, as old as the senseless murder of Abel. All killing is fratricide, is sororicide. Cain kills Abel. There is nothing new (p. 276).”

“It is God who brings the only surprise into this story. It is a surprise which is new and hopeful but also maddening as God spares Cain... That is the only surprise in the story of Cain and Abel, and it is the only hope (pp. 276 & 277).” Then Griffith states simply: “We must move into hope (p. 277).” And the book ends with two words: “Take hope (p. 278).”

The New Testament theologian who first told me of this book, an accomplished scholar, said he is not given readily to jealousy, but wishes he could write a book like this! The writing and research are invariably precisely on target. There is no faltering. And the writing is elegant yet accessible throughout.

The book could have been strengthened by greater interaction with the vast body of writings by and about René Girard and his scapegoating theory. Charles Bellinger, quoted above, argues that Girard is the greatest living theorist on violence. He is also, together with the vast body of research inspired by his theories over four decades, the most hopeful about the way out of the human morass of violence. Girard writes: “In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut-and-dried thing. Rather, it is a process under way, a text in travail... a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic

achievement of that trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world (Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G., ed. (1987). *Violent Origins*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 141).” His most recent book, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Orbis/Novalis, 2001), is a theological gem in this regard, due in part to its profound attention to anthropology, sadly so seldom the purview of theology!

A Political Science professor and friend argues that “confession and protest” are not enough, but political engagement is called for. Yet, if all nations are sullied by the mark of the Beast, as claims Griffith, then are not all politics magnetically oriented towards violence? How can one renounce violence and participate meaningfully in the public square of political life without being drawn in to its greasing the gears, if that grease is ultimately, inevitably as bottom line, violence? Surely we have in the examples of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. participation in the political process to effect profound societal change in the direction of nonviolence. Yet neither was a politician. One could therefore have wished for more discussion on the pragmatics of nonviolence.

Finally, one wonders at the relative paucity of historical and current witnesses for nonviolence. In particular, I stand amazed at the grand lacuna of nonviolent witness in most of church history. In the words of New Testament theologian Richard Hays: “One reason that the world finds the New Testament’s message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry... This indictment applies alike to liberation theologies that justify violence against oppressors and to establishment Christianity that continues to play chaplain to the military-industrial complex, citing just war theory and advocating the defense of a particular nation as though that were somehow a Christian value (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p. 343).”

This book was *not* voted by *Christianity Today* as one of the best books of 2002. Given its indictment of Evangelical America’s and others’ commitment to the way of violence rather than to Jesus, this is perhaps one of its most significant endorsements.