



Book Review of *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, Hans Boersma, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 288 pages

Recently, Dr. Boersma spent time with the Anglican/ecumenical men's contemplative order to which I belong: Sons of the Holy Cross. During his sharing his personal spiritual journey, as an aside he stated emphatically that he was *not* a pacifist! (I suspect it was for my benefit – as if I did not already know – *said with a smile.*) Fair enough is the thrust of this review: *but I have yet to experience a sustained theological argument as to why not!* – from him, or from anyone else...

In *Volume Two* of this series, the chapter, “The Cross: God’s Peace Work”, that appeared in *Stricken By God?* (2007), also interacts with the book under review.

Introduction

This is an impressive book. First, Dr. Boersma is a meticulous theologian. Second, his sources are wide-ranging and carefully considered (this based on my limited awareness of those cited!). Third, he interacts graciously with all positions discussed. Finally, the writing is lucid and accessible throughout.

Immediately in the Preface, Boersma declares, with reference to positive affirmation of the Reformed tradition:

This [the Reformed tradition] comes to the fore in my re-evaluation of violence as something that is not inherently negative; in my insistence that boundaries can function in wholesome ways and need at times to be defended; as well as in my argument that restorative justice can only function if we are willing to include the notion of punishment (p. 10).

As one discovers in reading the entire manuscript, Boersma never becomes specific on these issues. Just how much or exactly what kind of state violence is “not inherently negative” is never indicated. I shall return to this.

Atonement Theology and Hospitality

In the Introduction, Boersma writes:

This book is about atonement theology as an expression of God’s hospitality toward us (p. 15).

He acknowledges that

The exclusionary practices of the Christian Church, the violent suppression of internal dissenters throughout its history, and the collusion of the Church with the sword of the

state all seem to illustrate the fact that violence, not hospitality, lies at the heart of the Church (p. 16).

Yet he says repeatedly that violence is unavoidably part of the exercise of Christian hospitality.

After the Preface and Introduction, the book is divided into three parts. In Part 1, "The Divine Face of Hospitality", three chapters examine hospitality: the possibility; the limits in eternity; election in history. The first of the chapters interacts with Jacques Derrida, a major post-modern theorist who urges "pure hospitality" while asserting its human unattainability: ever a mirage, a spectre. Boersma holds out for "pure hospitality", asserting its fulfillment in the *eschaton*, but is as sceptical as Derrida about its temporal realization. So are pacifists. The difference is, Boersma affirms the legitimacy of violence in state warfare and criminal justice, pacifists do not. He affirms not merely the legitimacy, but following Augustine its ethical status as "an act of love". So Boersma asserts:

God's hospitality requires violence, just as his love necessitates wrath (p. 49).

Yet he paradoxically insists:

The absolute non-violence of God's *eschaton* – his pure hospitality – is always calling us to implement a hospitality that reduces violence as much as possible and promotes the kingdom of eternal justice and peace (p. 50).

This is perhaps the closest in parallel to the parental assertion: "This hurts me more than it hurts you", as the strap descends once more. And this may even be true for one individual, such discipline corrective, even restorative. But one must ask: May the current War on Terrorism in Iraq legitimately claim over 100,000 civilian deaths¹, and still be "justified violence"? May the United States outside China and Russia carry out the death penalty against the greatest number of criminals, many of whom, it is discovered post-execution, are innocent, and this still be "legitimate violence?" One looks in vain throughout the book for real-life examples of "good violence" by the state. One thinks of former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, whose own family had suffered terribly in the Nazi Holocaust. In 1996 when asked about the estimated over half a million Iraqi children who died as a result of sanctions against Iraq, her response was,

I think this is a very hard choice, but the price--we think the price is worth it. (Said on the American TV show "60 Minutes", May 12, 1996.)

One is reminded of St. Paul:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:17-21).

¹ Herbert, Bob, "Days of Shame", *The New York Times*, November 1, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/01/opinion/01herbert.html?ex=1100320165&ei=1&en=19bbfe0dbd061893>, 2004.

Then, at the end of the passage most used to defend state violence:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." *Love does no harm to its neighbor.* Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:8-10).

Extracting a doctrine of "good violence" from St. Paul in Romans (or the New Testament) is problematic, when the texts seem to point in an opposite direction. Reminiscent of his 1999 inaugural address at Trinity Western University, God's "dancing shoes" turn out to be *stomping boots* in the end, contrary to the fullness of New Testament witness.

In the next two chapters, Boersma deals with election in eternity and in history. He believes there is a contemporary aversion to violence in God out of step with biblical revelation, in particular the violence of the Old Testament. He writes:

By appealing to Jesus' *apparent* non-violence, we end up stretching the discontinuity between the Old and the New Testaments beyond the warrant of the biblical texts (p. 92, italics added).

One wonders on the contrary that Jesus saw no such discontinuity in this brief pericope, summarizing the entire sweep of Old Testament ethics:

Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt 22:36-40).

Boersma even adduces favourably the reading of Jesus and the New Testament by Richard Hays in a footnote (p. 93). Hays' "Violence in Defense of Justice" in that reading is an exacting exegetical study with this conclusion:

Thus, the church's embodiment of non-violence is – according to the Sermon on the Mount – its indispensable witness to the gospel...

Do the other texts in the [New Testament] canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount's teaching on non-violence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?

When the question is posed this way, the immediate result – as [Karl] Barth observed – is to underscore how impressively univocal is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point...

Thus from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in *accepting* suffering rather than *inflicting* it (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996, pp. 329 and 332)."

With reference to the Old Testament specifically, Hays writes from earlier discussion in his analysis:

This is the point at which one of the methodological guidelines proposed in Part III must come into play: the New Testament's witness is finally normative. If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament (p. 336).

Citing 2 Cor. 5:19, Hays writes:

Those who have been entrusted with such a message will read the Old Testament in such a way that the portrayals of God's mercy and eschatological restoration of the world will take precedence over its stories of justified violence (*ibid*, p. 337).

Interestingly, in the same footnote mentioned above, Boersma also adduces another New Testament theologian, Christopher Marshall in *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (2001). Marshall's careful exegetical conclusions with reference to a Christian response to crime are that "restorative punishment" is *divested of violence in favour of accountability and the pain of taking responsibility to make things right*. Marshall subsequently published studies of the classic parables: the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son (2012).

Richard Hays sums up his study provocatively:

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. (By comparison, our problems with sexual sin are trivial.) 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 (p. 343)." This is fitting contrast to Boersma's statement: "Put provocatively, God's hospitality in Christ needs an edge of violence to ensure the welcome of humanity and all creation (p. 93).

Recapitulation

Part 2 concerns "The Cruciform Face of Hospitality", and consists of five chapters. It is the heart of Boersma's work. Boersma writes in turn:

At the heart of this study lies the conviction that the cross expresses the hospitality of God (p. 112).

There is some very rewarding theology throughout this section. The discussion of metaphors for the atonement is rich. Boersma writes:

The metaphor of hospitality is, therefore, more foundational than any of the three metaphors of traditional atonement theology (p. 112).

He favours Irenaeus

as a significant protagonist of an exemplarist understanding of the atonement (p. 121).

It is also a “recapitulation” understanding that incorporates, Boersma argues, elements of all three of the traditional models.

Christ [takes] the place of Adam and of all humanity and as such [gives] shape to the genesis of a new humanity (p. 112).

But how?

This is where the three atonement models come in. As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ instructs us and models for us the love of God (moral influence). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ suffers God’s judgment on evil and bears the suffering of the curse of the Law (penal representation). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ fights the powers of evil, expels demons, withstands satanic temptation to the point of death, and rises victorious from the grave (Christus Victor) (p. 113).

Chapter 6 is given to an extended discussion of René Girard’s theories of mimetic desire and scapegoating violence. There is too much complexity both to Girard’s analysis, which approaches the Bible *anthropologically*, but as complement to *theology* (Girard readily acknowledges he is not a trained theologian), and to Boersma’s critique. Boersma believes that Girard’s theology of the cross

has its foundation in an ontology of violence rather than in an ontology of hospitality (p. 134).

I confess I’m not clear on why this critique. However, while it is true Girard sees scapegoating violence in virtually all cultures, he points constantly to a kingdom of non-violence. Certainly he has inspired major theological reflection in that light by numerous authors, despite Jacques Ellul’s forecast that perhaps no contemporary theologian would take him seriously due to his nonsacrificial reading of the Bible. Several have².

For a balancing critique of Girard in interaction with major secular theorists on violence and the work of Søren Kierkegaard, see *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil* (Bellinger 2001.) Boersma does not cite this work on Girard; a significant omission. Over against Boersma, Bellinger sees Kierkegaard and Girard refuting a secular “ontology of violence”:

The most basic root of violence is the alienation of human beings from their Creator; thus, non-theological ‘explanations’ of violence are actually caught up in and expressive of the same atmosphere of human alienation from God out of which violence arises. [Footnote 7 at this point quotes John Milbank that secular social philosophy is complicit with an ‘ontology of violence,’ a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force.”, (*Theology and Social Theory*, 1991, p. 4.)] *As such, they are unable to master their subject: the ‘explanations’ are themselves trapped in the tragedy of human history* (p. 96, emphasis in original).

Dr. Boersma seems similarly implicated by this observation, himself captive to an “ontology of violence” (see his comment on Darby Kathleen Ray below). With reference to John Milbank, Boersma writes:

² Please see the website <https://violenceandreligion.com/>. See also footnote 2 in Boersma, p. 134.

Milbank's exposition would gain in consistency if he were to recognize the pervasive character of violence and were to state unequivocally [not that 'all violence is evil' (2003, p. 26), but] that violence can be positive or negative depending on its relationship to the telos of absolute eschatological hospitality (p. 243).

Out of faithfulness to the Reformed tradition in particular, Boersma seems able to offer not so much a biblical discussion of violence, though he readily references Scripture, rather a highly sophisticated version of *realpolitik* about violence. His discussion also strikes a similar note to (albeit again with theological sophistication) the ethical dualism of premillennialism: all application of the early Church's central catechism, the Sermon on the Mount, is relegated to time outside history.

So Dr. Boersma writes in response to feminist theologian Darby Kathleen Ray's embrace of the term, "a tragic view of reality":

A tragic view of reality can hardly uphold non-violence as an absolute or nonnegotiable standard but would have to recognize that violence lies at the heart of things and cannot possibly be avoided (p. 199).

This statement might similarly be made of sin, to which St. Paul rejoins,

Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law [love is the fulfillment of the law - Rom. 13:10], but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin (Rom 7:25).

The Church and Public Justice

Part 3 looks at "The Public Face of Hospitality". Boersma says powerfully:

The divine means of embodying hospitality in the world³ - primarily the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments - cannot escape the tension between hospitality and the violence that exists in all of human life. That being said, I also argue that in Christ the Church is the primary agent of God's forgiveness in the world, and that the resurrection life - the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation - must especially be evident in the liturgy of the Church. Only to the degree that the Church is a community of hospitality and reconciliation can she also play a role in opening the doors of the kingdom of God (p. 208).

He says too:

True hospitality reaches out to the other and can never be satisfied with erecting impermeable boundaries (p. 211).

One must of course ask: And what is more "impermeable" (final) than killing in war and the death penalty?

Boersma asserts:

³ This seems conscious allusion to L. Gregory Jones' superb book, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (1995). Several citations in Boersma's book are from this study.

The limitation of Eucharistic hospitality to those who are baptised indicates again that the Church has boundaries that the Church's hospitality cannot be absolute if the Church wants to remain the Church (footnote 37, p. 220).

True, as far as it goes. And one must rejoin: Nor can its violence (in warfare or criminal justice) be absolute/terminal. While the Church practises discerning discipline, it is ever restorative in intent, this side of the Age to Come. This can be seen in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13; his teaching about conflict resolution in Matthew 18; Paul's call for restoration in Galatians 6, etc. Boersma himself writes correctly:

Confession and penance... constitute one of the ways in which the Church safeguards and protects its character as a hospitable community (p. 228).

Vengeance is God's purview, which in itself is God's wrath in an agony of restorative covenant love (Romans 12:19 and context; compare the book of Hosea, especially 11:8)⁴. The Church is tasked to offer endless invitation to the sinner, carry out incessant evangelism.

While

Hospitality loses its character when it admits everyone – perhaps even the devil – to come in (p. 224),

the Church loses its soul when it consigns anyone to nonrestorative “violence”⁵. This excludes all killing, to say the least. Boersma never engages this matter. He asserts with approval, Justified violence, in an Augustinian paradigm, can be an act of love (p. 48).

But what does that mean in the finality of killing? Boersma never addresses Jesus' clarion command:

But I tell you, Love your enemies... (Matthew 5:44);

and again:

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:27 & 28. Compare St. Paul in Romans 12 and 13.).

⁴ John Driver argues thus:

God's response to the unfaithfulness of humanity... is wrath. However, in the biblical perspective the wrath of God is not an abstract law of cause and effect in a moral universe to which somehow even God must subject himself. Biblical wrath is an intensely personal response of God to the unfaithfulness of his people with a view to protecting the salvific covenant relationship which he has established in the Old Testament and the New....

Inasmuch as *God's wrath is his wounded covenant love*, it is in reality more salvific than punitive in its intention. (*Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, (1986, p. 183, emphasis added).

This is also the conclusion of Christopher Marshall's two publications (2001, 2012), of Willard Swartley's massive tome on “peace” in the New Testament (2006), and of the writers in *Hellrazed?* (2017) – to name but a few outstanding studies.

⁵ Walter Wink presents a compelling case for the myth of “redemptive violence” in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (1992). Boersma affirms the redemptive possibilities of violence, but is never specific with relation to war or capital punishment. *How can he be?*

A spear through the gut; a bullet to the head; an atomic bomb dropped twice on Japanese cities, bombs and missiles raining down on thousands of villages, towns, and cities throughout the 20th century, into the 21st... By any use of language or reason, secular and theological, such can never be described as “acts of love”! I will not mince words by asking: *Is this not reprehensible theological sleight of hand, a ruse first employed by Augustine’s development of a pagan “just war” theory, and slavishly repeated by countless theologians since? While Dr. Boersma has “a great cloud of witnesses” as company, it is not “good exegetical” company.*

In the Epilogue, he writes:

If it is true, however, that all human practices of hospitality are in paradoxical relationship with violence, precisely ultimately to overcome violence, what does this do to our humanity in the eschaton? (p. 257).

He adduces

Irenaeus’s awareness that the eschaton breaks the barriers of the limitations and conditions that constitute our human nature today (p. 260).

He also indicates that

The end to violence with the arrival of God’s unconditional hospitality does not mean that we will cease to be human – despite our inability to picture a humanity that is no longer dependent on boundary maintenance (p. 260).

It seems here that Boersma almost affirms the biblical already-but-not-yet nature of Kingdom Come. One must ask: Why cannot such a humanity be pictured here this side of the Age to Come? See below discussion of *Raising Abel* (1996) and *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (2001). John Howard Yoder, reflecting the biblical perspective, has written:

The church is called to be *now* what the world one day is to become *then*.

Dr. Boersma mentions theologian James Alison’s book with reference to René Girard, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (1996). But he never discusses it. Alison posits a Christian call to embrace *now* an “eschatological” (non-violent) imagination, over against dominant “apocalyptic” (violent) practices in the Church and world.

This whole book,
he writes,

is structured around this principle of analogy: God’s revelation is known thanks to a subversion from within of human violence (p. 33).

He says later:

The phrase ‘God is love’ is not one more slogan which we can tack on to the end of other things we know about God and which we can brandish when we feel like it. It is the end result of a process of human discovery which constitutes a slow and complete subversion from within of any other perception of God... The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (p. 48).

Finally, with reference to the ultimate violence of the traditional doctrine of hell, Alison writes:

The commonly held understanding of hell remains strictly within the apocalyptic imagination, that is, it is the result of a violent separation between the good and the evil worked by a vengeful god. It seems to me that if hell is understood thus, we have quite simply not understood the Christian faith; and the Christian story, instead of being the creative rupture in the system of this world, has come to be nothing less than its sacralization. That is, the good news which Jesus brought has been quite simply lost (pp. 174 & 5).

I suggest that Dr. Boersma has lost sight ethically of “the good news” to some degree. I concluded similarly in a book review of Larry Dixon’s *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teachings on Hell* (1992)⁶. J. I. Packer wrote a rousing Foreword to Dixon’s book. Interestingly, Dr. Boersma is poised to take over the J. I. Packer Chair of Theology at Regent College⁷. I wrote at the end of the review:

There is ultimately no room for Dixon’s thesis in the biblical Good News that is shot through with God’s “Amazing Grace” - how sweet the sound! Dixon consistently gives grace a terribly sour note! I suggest he is not compelled to his view by biblical evidence but by a misguided hermeneutic: the wrong “box cover”. Biblically, God’s love *is* the ultimate word, and judgment and redemption equally are subsumed under that love. In the end, “mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13)”! in an amazing paradox of grace whereby God is both “just and justifier” (Rom. 3:26). For, as Jesus said repeatedly (Matt. 9:13 and 12:7):

I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

I call on Dixon, Packer, and all who hold to an ostensibly sub-Christian, though longstanding “traditional doctrine of hell”:

Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ (Matt. 9:13).

Such a call is above all a call to *conversion*.

Three Responses

I conclude with three considerations.

First, as indicated earlier, the author affirms a sophisticated *realpolitik* and ahistorical eschatological consummation that says we cannot escape, this side of the *eschaton*, violence endemic to the human condition. This is patently and painfully true. But to say we must therefore embrace “boundary violence”, whether directed and blessed by the Church as in past centuries, or endorsed by the Church today for the state to perform in war and penal justice, is another matter. We may attempt as far as we can to deny the state such power. We may refuse to participate directly in endorsing or performing its violence. We may, in other words follow the Pauline admonition:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18).

⁶ Please see earlier in this book the chapter “WAR AND HELL – and Exception-Clause Footnote Theology” for that review combined with one of the war movie, “*Saving Private Ryan*”.

⁷ He is leaving that Chair in 2019.

And again, we may commit to

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).

Concrete examples of alternative responses to crime are found in Restorative Justice literature worldwide⁸. There is also the compelling story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission⁹. I write this notwithstanding the pessimism of Jean Bethke Elshtain:

The value of this approach in dealing with not just one state's internal efforts to build constitutional order but with relations between states is untested; political restorative justice seems likely, however, to fall prey to the classic dilemmas of international politics (2003, p. 130).¹⁰

As to international politics: see any of the following books for challenge to Boersma and Elshtain: Duane Friesen *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict: A Realist Pacifist Perspective*, (Friesen 1986); *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of Deep-Rooted Conflict Can Open Paths to Reconciliation*, Ottawa: Novalis, (Redekop 2002); *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, (Shriver 1995); *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*, (Stassen 1992); *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Stassen, Editor 1998). I also include a chapter about this in *Volume One* of this series: "Not Enough!" and *International Restorative Justice*".

Boersma, faithful to his beloved Reformed tradition, seems to capitulate to violence before he even tries otherwise. And though as indicated he is in good company with a great cloud of witnesses, including Miroslav Volf who endorses Boersma's conclusions in a quote on the back cover¹¹, it must be said that this is not only failed rigorous reading of the New Testament text when its ethical call seems hard, it is bad faith.

⁸ For several papers from the Sixth International Restorative Justice Conference, view:

<http://www.sfu.ca/cfrj/cresources.html>; for a general website on worldwide developments, see: www.justicefellowship.org/. See also: *Restorative Justice in Context: International Practice and Directions*, (Weitekamp and Kerner, editors, 2003).

⁹ *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Mpilo Tutu (1999).

¹⁰ See *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, Jean Bethke Elshtain, (2003). I say in my review, of the above quote, using her very own language in critique of non-violence:

This represents reprehensible *realpolitik* copout, sheer ignorance of contrary evidence, and nihilistic pessimism.

See my full review at: <http://www.clarion-journal.ca/article.php?story=20040723073421443>; footnotes at: <http://www.clarion-journal.ca/index.php?topic=bookreviews>.

¹¹ He writes:

This is a bold book. It takes courage in today's academic culture to argue that divine violence is an unavoidable part of bringing the sinful world into an eschatological state of pure hospitality. Those who tend instinctively to reject any notion of violence as unworthy of God better take Boersma's arguments seriously.

A rejoinder:

This is a bold claim profoundly lacking in biblical evidence. In response to Volf about this book, I keep asking: "Why take this claim of violence in God seriously?" No one has come close to my satisfaction in supplying a rigorous theological, ethically sound, philosophically consistent answer. To the contrary, there is an array of those who compellingly conclude its opposite!

Richard Hays in his masterful *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (1996) does several other thorough exegetical examinations of contemporary issues as illustrative applications of how to read the New Testament faithfully. On homosexuality, though he is sorely tempted to choose otherwise, faithful exegesis makes him call for celibacy by homosexually oriented Christians. John Howard Yoder, author of the ground-breaking study, *The Politics of Jesus*¹² (which Stanley Hauerwas predicts will eventually be seen as one of the most significant theological works of the twentieth century) once told me no theologian had ever refuted his nonviolent reading of the New Testament. They had invariably dismissed him because it contradicted *realpolitik*. An oft-given assertion is no truer for its repetition. Boersma's book presented a regular pro-violence traditional refrain that biblically simply rings hollow. Yoder's book might have been entitled in this light: *The Realpolitik of Jesus*. And Jesus might have asked in this context:

Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? (Mark 8:18.)

Second, and related, though Dr. Boersma is a very gifted scholar and theologian, in the end, in particular in his treatment of violence, he seems to simply float above the ground of historical reality.

Ironically, his book is impervious to the *realpolitik* of invariably vast numbers of "innocent" victims of state violence. (For instance, it is claimed that up to half of the 50 to 60 millions killed in World War II were non-combatants.) If one understands Jesus as the Ultimate Innocent Victim who was sacrificed once for all so that all ever after, no matter their actual sin and guilt, could be declared just, then the circle of God's embrace this side of the *eschaton* is without boundary at all. And one has inklings that it just might be that way in the Age to Come, unless there is obstinate refusal, itself the defining boundary. In this case God's rejection is actually not a violence but an endorsement of choice. God "gave them over" in the chilling words of Romans 1:24. As C.S. Lewis put it: In the end, there are finally two kinds of humanity – those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done'."

C.F.D. Moule, upon a close reading of the New Testament witness, writes¹³:

If God has willed the dire consequences that ensue on sin, it does not necessarily follow that he has willed them retributively, punitively. It may be that he has willed them as the only way of doing justice to the freedom and responsibility of the human personality, as he has created it (*Punishment and Retribution: An Attempt to Delimit Their Scope in New Testament Thought* (2018, p. 7).)

The challenge here is for Dr. Boersma to test out his thesis that humanity is woefully and ineluctably mired in violence, and thus the Church must embrace it at the boundaries which are notoriously violent, this side of the Age to Come. In this regard, as Millard Lind pointed out in

¹² As indicated also elsewhere in this publication: I no longer reference Yoder in any of my writings. I leave in his name and his book here only out of historical faithfulness. Yoder sexually assaulted an untold number of women, leaving an incalculable legacy of violence, pain and shame. Please see [here](#) for a reflection by a man who edited four of Yoder's works.

¹³ His essay, used with permission, "Punishment and Retribution: An Attempt to Delimit Their Scope in New Testament Thought" is found in *Volume One* of this series.

Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel (1980), the story of Gideon is paradigmatic of God's initiative at the boundaries. Though it is not a perfect story of nonviolence in the Book of Judges. We wait for the story of the Cross to see God's judgment and God's embrace join as the Psalmist indicated:

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps 85:10).

Walter Wink in his fascinating study *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (1992), beginning on page 244 presents a select list of politically impactful non-violent action. He cites Gene Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973) and other publications as examples. James William McClendon Jr.'s *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I*, (1986), adduces three biographies of Christians attempting to live out this ethic faithfully. Co-authors George F. R. Ellis and Nancey Murphy present a fascinating case for an applied ethic of non-violence in *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (1996). They argue "from below" in the social sciences, and "from above" theologically, for a "kenotic ethic" that centres on self-sacrifice and non-violence. When asked by me after a lecture he gave why so few Christians align with this kenotic non-violent "grain of the universe"¹⁴, Ellis responded simply:

It is just too hard.

Finally, Dr. Boersma does not mention or discuss *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Griffith 2002). The book stands in striking counterpoint to Boersma's thesis on violence.

Most surprising about this book is its seeming providential timing:

In an instant [after September 11, 2001], explains the author,

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).

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 (1993, p. 1).

In *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (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 his second book with reference to violence and war. He confronts us with our profound addictions to lies and violence, which two go hand in hand. As Jesus said of all caught up in scapegoating ways¹⁵,

¹⁴ This is John Howard Yoder's expression; almost title of Stanley Hauerwas' 2001 Gifford Lectures and book, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (2001). Yoder wrote:

... people who bear [non-violent] crosses are working with the grain of the universe (quoted by Hauerwas, *ibid*, p. 6).

¹⁵ Though this text tragically has been used to fan violent anti-Semitism.

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

The first casualty of war,
Lord Ponsonby claimed,
is truth.

It is up to us to “see” and change, “hear” and understand as Jesus challenged in Matthew 13:13 – 15 and elsewhere.

Griffith further 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).

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, emphasis added).

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).

Walter Wink similarly asserts that *Jesus' teaching is clear: If we do not find God in the enemy, we have not found God at all. The litmus test for love of God is love of neighbour. The litmus test for love of neighbour is love of enemy. Fail to love the enemy creates a dominoes effect in similar response to neighbour and God.*

Near the end of the book, Griffith asks:

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).

He says at the end:

In effect, the resurrection is God's war on the terrorism of both guerrilla bands and nation states (p. 269).

Conclusion

When Hans Boersma's book was in manuscript form, I happened to chat with him about it in a grocery store. I said I'd be happy to read his manuscript. Now that I have done so, I am reminded of C.H. Spurgeon's reply to someone he disagreed with, I read my Bible.

Low blow. Nonetheless, I call for more biblical exegetical work on the issue of violence and non-violence from Dr. Boersma's gifted pen (well, keyboard). *He just might rediscover Jesus as Prince of Peace for the very first time!*

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