

The Sickness of America, The Sickness of Humanity

By Wayne Northey

This was sent to me by e-mail:

All Time Best Quote

In a recent interview, General Norman Schwarzkopf was asked if he thought there was room for forgiveness toward the people who have harbored and abetted the terrorists who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on America.

His answer was classic Schwarzkopf.

The General said, "I believe that forgiving them is God's function. OUR job is to arrange the meeting."

AMEN!

The good General apparently never read some parts of the Lord's Prayer and commentary: " '... *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...* ' For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matt 6:9-15)

Time magazine privileges history's unfolding as function of *great players*, not *great events*. Two instances were 1990's front-page photos, one captioned, "The Face of a Hero", the other, "The Face of Evil". General Norman Schwarzkopf was the former, Timothy McVeigh the latter.

My second year French prof taught that perspective is everything. Timothy McVeigh killed 168 innocents in Oklahoma City, and was executed. Yet he is martyr and hero amongst white supremacists and similar ilk crackpots. General Schwarzkopf, celebrated American hero, was contrarily hated in Iraq in the first Gulf War, responsible in fact for the death of as many as 100,000 combatants and civilians, most infamously on "the highway to hell", when thousands of retreating Iraqi troops, mostly teenagers, were relentlessly slaughtered "like a turkey shoot".

When it comes to resort to violence, one person's hero is ineluctably another's killer, for in violence, *end and means are one*.

The above is borne out in the research of arguably the greatest contemporary theorist on violence: René Girard. From Charles Bellinger's discussion in *The Genealogy of Violence*, Girard's theory begins with the experience in all cultures known to history of "existential lack" or "ontological sickness", which lack leads to endless societal cycles of humans' imitating others, which invariably elicits violence. Humanity historically

prevented itself from descending into a chaos of self-destruction by choosing a scapegoat whose death would create a new sense of social unanimity and cohesion. This may be routine sacrifice of victims in ancient Incan “civilizations” to secure blessings from the gods; mob lynching of Blacks to protect “righteous” white folk; immolation of Jews in Nazi Holocaust to excuse collective German guilt; prosecution of a minority of “criminals” through imprisonment and the death penalty to let the “law-abiding” off the hook; Allied saturation bombing of two million civilians in Germany and Japan to “*make the world safe for democracy*”.

Girard, claims Bellinger, applies a “hermeneutic of suspicion” to all such ubiquitous scapegoating. The great either/or of human existence is: *either civilization will continue sacrificing victims, or humans will learn to follow the way of love of neighbour and enemy*. All “civilized” societies in the end exercise violence in diametric opposition to “love your neighbour/enemy as yourself” – as *being* yourself. We are, according to African *ubuntu* tradition, human only through others. Destroy the enemy, destroy our very humanity.

There are increasingly open comparisons between President Bush in his “War Against Terror” and various fascist leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini, in the kind of murderous police state/military power America has become. Here are the chilling words of CIA operative “Anonymous” (Michael Scheuer) concerning civilian casualties in an interview about his 2004 book, *Imperial Hubris*: “That’s the way war is. I’ve never really understood the idea that any American government, any American elected official is responsible for protecting civilians who are not Americans.”

What he’s also obviously never embraced is *Gospel*. The tragedy is, most American church leadership, certainly most Evangelical church leadership, from Billy Graham to whomever, fail to understand too. **That is the nub of America’s religious idolatry; of America’s sickness unto death.** A full-size bronze statue of Billy Graham preaching in front of a cross will be unveiled at the 2006 Southern Baptist annual meeting in Greensboro, N.C. George Bush, the most executing state Governor ever domestically, and fast approaching the most killing President worldwide, attributes his “conversion” to Mr. Graham. All that is needed to complete such pure American civil religion idolatry is for Graham’s statue to be installed on Capitol Hill and captioned, “*Anti-Christ*”.

Historian Bishop Stephen Neill once tellingly designated America as the mission field where “religion is up, morality down”. Neill’s is possibly the most succinct description ever of the pure spirit of pharisaism.

American Evangelical church historian Douglas Frank in *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1986) wrote: “We are the Pharisees of our time, if anyone is (p. 229).” In the Epilogue of a sweeping historical and sociological analysis of Evangelicalism in the late 19th, early 20th centuries, he added: “Whether in auspicious or declining times, as we have seen, we display a tenacious commitment to self-deceit. It is true that we are those who like to think that we heed Jeremiah’s words, ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.’ Our history, however,

gives evidence rather of Jeremiah's wisdom in adding these words: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?' (Jer. 17:7,9). In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits (p. 278)."

This deceit/conceit leads to scapegoating violence at its most religious and pragmatic. It is *Fox News* host Bill O'Reilly's "final solution" to fighting the Muslims: "What we can do is bomb the living daylights out of them, just like we did in the Balkans." It is also the all-time most decorated American war hero General Curtis LeMay, more celebrated even than Schwarzkopf, who boasted that "we scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night of March 9-10 [1945] than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined." He also admitted that had America lost the war, he and many other American leaders would have been executed as war criminals. The same was acknowledged in Errol Morris' 2004 documentary, *The Fog of War*.

The "clash of civilizations" (Samuel Huntington) is in truth the "clash of barbarisms" (Gilbert Achcar), as René Girard's life work so compellingly presents. Jared Diamond in *The Third Chimpanzee* wrote that the only consistent signature of our species is genocide. This is certainly the case with all Empires, not least *Pax Americana*. Psychologist John Brand, who directed me to that insight, says humans are "reptilian" or "raptorial" at our very core. Jeremiah writing in the context of Babylon, modern Iraq, as already seen said the same: "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)*"

The "face of fascism" turns out to be *my face and your face*, unless we turn our faces individually and collectively towards the neighbour and enemy in relentlessly creative new embrace. The Gospel addresses this: "*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:35)*. There is evangelism without the Gospel: it is ubiquitous; *and*, says Jeremiah, profoundly iniquitous.

Dominant American evangelism, following Luther, calls the individual to find a gracious God without concomitant reference to neighbour or enemy. Theologian Walter Wink taught that the Gospel calls us without exception to find God in neighbour and enemy, *or not find God at all!*