

Is Violence Master of Us All?: Fight, Flight or Just Peacemaking

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NOTE: This was presented here and there, including at the above. It may also be found on my website: [Is Violence Master of Us All?: Fight, Flight or Just Peacemaking](#).

Introduction

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world (Wink, 1992, p. 13)., writes one contemporary cultural observer and New Testament theologian, [Walter Wink](#). More than any religious spirituality, including Christian, violence is the cultural air we breath. This century has seen more people slaughtered than all previous centuries combined—107 millions in wars and regional conflicts by the mid-90's. And Christians have led, blessed, and participated in the vast majority of this killing, and continue to do so into the third millennium.

Yet this massive slaughter has been carried on in a world ostensibly dominantly under the sway of Christian spirituality. Is it therefore to be concluded that a Christian worldview and *praxis* lead ineluctably to an ultimate bloodthirsty spirituality, and therefore the sooner eradicated from the human cultural landscape, the better? Or is there “something rotten in the state of Denmark?”—in the worldwide expression of Christianity that at times is profoundly aberrant from the way and teachings of its Founder? That is the thesis of brilliant 19th-century Danish theologian and social theorist [Søren Kierkegaard](#), founder of existentialism. He wrote:

My position is that the whole prevailing official proclamation of Christianity is a conspiracy against the Bible—we suppress what does not suit us (quoted in Bellinger, 2001, p. 98).¹

The defining religious ethos of Western spirituality historically has been Christianity. Christianity has also been the reigning ideology in the West until into the nineteenth century. While it is salutary to discuss other world spiritualities with reference to violence and peacemaking, no other religion or spirituality has remotely impacted the formation of the West like Christianity.

While one cannot wish away the past, can it be too much to hope that the twenty-first century for Christian spirituality world-wide will be marked by a profound renewed impulse towards peacemaking? Such a world-transforming spirituality has never been more needed! It is the contention of this paper that the Christian story offers a dramatically alternative narrative to that

¹ This of course applies in all areas of acquiring knowledge. Historian and sociologist of science [Steven Shapin](#) at Harvard University, contends in another context that

... trust is imperative for constituting every kind of knowledge. Knowledge-making is always a collective enterprise: people have to know whom to trust in order to know something about the natural world.

(Transcript of [David Cayley](#)'s [How To Think About Science](#), 24 hours of broadcast interviews on [CBC Ideas](#) with top historians, sociologists and philosophers of science., p. 148).

of resort to violence, seen unfortunately so predominantly in Christianity's long history. I will argue that the story the Christian faith tells is eternal wellspring for the spirituality of nonviolence, however massively unfaithful Christian adherents have been to the plot-line down through the ages².

Pre-Christian Origin of Contemporary Ethos of Violence

Walter Wink traces Western history's central ethos of violence to the Babylonian creation myth in existence well over a thousand years before Christ. Creation is seen in Babylonian religion as a fundamentally formative act of violence. In theologian Hans Boersma's telling,

The creation myth, [*Enuma Elish*](#), tells the story of Apsu (the male, primeval sweet water ocean) and Tiamat (the female, primeval salt water ocean). From the commingling of the two waters came divine offspring, who in turn gave birth to more generations of gods. The young gods, however, disturbed the peace of Tiamat and Apsu, who decided to destroy the younger generation of gods. Apsu was killed before he could carry out his evil plans. Tiamat, enraged, planned evil against her offspring to avenge Apsu. The young gods then asked the young upstart, Marduk, to lead them in battle. Marduk agreed, defeated Tiamat's forces and sliced her carcass in two, creating from the one half the firmament of heaven and from the other half the foundation of the earth. Thus, Marduk created order out of the chaos of the waters. With the cosmos now in place, the gods started to complain to Marduk that they had too much work to do in the newly created universe. Marduk, therefore, created humans to do the work. He created the first human beings out of the blood of Tiamat's second husband and captain of her army, Kingu.

This story shows that in the Babylonian worldview there was no absolute preference for good over evil. 'Evil' is already planned by Apsu and Tiamat before the universe has come into being (I.52; II.3). It is a normal part of the universe, not a later, alien intrusion into a fundamentally good world. Power is the ultimate morality. It is only 'by violence that the youngest of the gods establishes order (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 179).' Moreover, the violence among the gods in turn justifies human violence. The Babylonian king receives his authority from the gods. Paul Ricoeur, in his analysis of the Babylonian creation myth, makes the point that the king represents the god who in violence has overcome chaos. This means that the king's enemy represents the forces of evil, the resurgence of chaos (Ricoeur 1969, p. 196). 'Heavenly events are mirrored by earthly events, and what happens above happens below' (Wink, 1992, p. 15). Polytheism here does not offer a solution to violence; rather, it covers the origin and life of both gods and humans with the blood of violence (Boersma, 1999).

² We read:

[Stanley Hauerwas](#) has suggested that the only thing that makes the Christian church different from any other group in society is that the church is the only community that gathers around the true story. It is not the piety, or the sincerity, or the morality of the church that distinguishes us (Christians have no monopoly on virtue). It is the story we treasure, the story from which we derive our identity, our vision, and our values. And for us to do that would be a horrible mistake, if it were not a true story, indeed the true story, which exposes the lies, deceptions, and half-truths upon which human beings and human societies so often stake their lot (Marshall, 2000, p. 13.)

Creation is a violent victory over an enemy older than creation. Evil is prior to good. Violence is in the godhead itself. Humanity is created out of bloody violence, and hence humans are seen to be violent to the very core. Explains Walter Wink:

The distinctive feature of the myth, is the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. This myth is the original religion of the status quo, the first articulation of 'might makes right'.

He continues:

Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion (Wink, 1992, pp. 16 & 17).

With rare exceptions, this myth permeates contemporary culture the world over. This "religion" is at the heart of Western culture, in particular North American society, like no other rival such as Judaism or Christianity. It is pervasive in children's comics and cartoon shows. We read:

In a period when Christian Sunday schools are dwindling, the myth of redemptive violence has won children's voluntary acquiescence to a regimen of religious indoctrination more exhaustive and effective than any in the history of religions. Estimates vary widely, but the average child is reported to log roughly thirty-six thousand hours of television by age eighteen, including some fifteen thousand murders. In prime-time evening shows, our children are served up about sixteen entertaining acts of violence (two of them lethal) every night; on the weekend the number of violent acts almost doubles (thirty). By age sixteen, the average child spends as much time watching television as in school (Wink, 1992, p. 23).

On my wall at work, (*obviously pre-social media ubiquitous infestation*), used to be a poster which read:

If 'prison is a school for crime,' is television its kindergarten?

Christian Origin and History of Contemporary Christian Ethos of Violence

There is no question that Emperor Constantine, who first legalized Christian worship in the early fourth century, also caused the Church to embrace for the first time an ethic of state violence which Christians have largely endorsed ever since.

This began particularly to emerge after the "Papal Revolution" of the 11th century. In this century, [Saint Anselm of Canterbury](#) wrote a famous treatise, *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), on the atonement. The "atonement" is about the effect of Christ's death on the cross. There have been four *main* discernible views of the atonement in the history of the church, of which the second chronologically, the "satisfaction theory," has been the most dominant in Western history since the 11th century.

The second group of theories may be said to have originated with Anselm, who saw sin as dishonour to the majesty of God. On the cross the God-man rendered satisfaction for this dishonour. Along similar lines the Reformers thought that Christ paid the penalty sinners incurred when they broke God's law (Morris, "Atonement", p. 83).

Without elaboration, Anselm's theory, in how it was applied, created a cultural "structure of affect"³ that understood God's justice in primarily violent terms: God clearly demanded blood satisfaction for wrongs against him, like feudal lords did in the society of the time. It was and is consequently not a big step for Christians who believe the satisfaction theory of the atonement to employ violence in the pursuit of justice. This pursuit has dominated Western Christendom ever since.

1. A Short History of Christian Violence⁴

a. As Christianity expanded into the Roman Empire during its first three centuries it met with significant resistance from the governmental authorities, which often took the form of direct persecutions resulting in Christian martyrdoms. During this period, Christians were, generally speaking, the recipients of violence rather than the perpetrators of it. After Christianity became a tolerated and then an official religion, however, it became much more common for violent acts to be carried out by Christians.

b. A notable example is the execution of Priscillian, a Spanish ascetic. His enemies in the Spanish church lobbied the Emperor Maximus, and succeeded in obtaining his condemnation for heresy. Priscillian and one of his followers, the noblewoman Eucrotia, were beheaded in 384. This was the first case in which heretics had been formally tried, convicted, and executed through the cooperation of church and state, foreshadowing the extensive powers of the Medieval Inquisition (Dowley, 1995, 150-151).

c. In the year 390, the people of Thessalonica murdered the military commander of the city. The Christian Emperor Theodosius ordered a massacre of the city's inhabitants, which resulted in more than 7,000 deaths. Under pressure of excommunication, exerted by Ambrose, Theodosius publicly repented of his sin (Dowley, 1995, p. 151).

d. The Crusades were a series of military expeditions organized by Western European Christians, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in an effort to recover the Holy Land from the Muslim "infidels." The first Crusade was very successful militarily, achieving several victories over the "Turks" as the Western armies advanced toward Jerusalem. On July 1, 1097, one of the main Muslim armies was defeated and almost completely decimated by the Crusaders.

Two years later the Crusaders reached Jerusalem and captured it after a relatively brief siege. In the course of taking the city they massacred most of the inhabitants—men, women, and children. Jerusalem was described by observers as being "awash in a sea of blood." The Crusaders saw their actions as being an expression of God's righteous judgment on the Muslim "infidels" who

³ This is [Timothy Gorringer's](#) term (1996).

⁴ I am drawing on [The Genealogy of Violence](#) (Bellinger, 2001), much of it *verbatim*.

deserved to die for their rejection of Christ and their “desecration” of the Holy City. Various subsequent Crusades were carried out during the next two centuries, most resulting in military failure or short-lived Latin kingdoms in the East. The net result of the Crusades was to further separate the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity from each other and to ensure the alienation of the Muslim world from Christianity—an alienation which to a large extent has continued up to the present day (Dowley, 1995, pp.278 - 279).

Between 1209 and 1229 a Crusade was organized against the Albigensian heretics in southern France. Because a significant portion of the nobility of that region had sided with the Albigensians, the fighting was long and drawn-out, resulting in tremendous loss of life. The Roman Catholic bishop of the city of Bézier, when asked by the besieging soldiers how to tell the heretics from the orthodox, is reported to have said:

Kill them all, God will sort them out.

e. The Inquisition was the internal European institution which corresponded to the external Crusades. Its main function was to identify and punish the “infidels” within the Western world who were perceived as a threat to society. The Inquisition was organized in the first half of the thirteenth century, largely in response to the Albigensian heresy in France, but its power was soon extended into many areas of Europe.

Typically, the Inquisitors would enter a city and establish a court. They would summon all heretics to come forward and confess their heresy. Those who did so were treated with relative leniency. Those who were accused of heresy by others and found guilty were punished more severely, sometimes with death (at the hands of the civil authorities, not the Inquisitors themselves).

In 1252 Pope Innocent IV officially approved the use of torture by the Inquisition to extract “the truth” from defendants. Justification for this procedure was found in the tradition of Roman law. Methods of torture included the rack and placing hot coals on the soles of the feet. At the close of the court proceedings, the sentences of those found guilty were announced publicly in a ceremony referred to as an *auto-da-fé*—“act of faith” (Dowley, 1995, pp. 321-324).

In 1478 a relatively autonomous branch of the Inquisition was established with papal approval in Spain. It carried out a campaign against Jews and Muslims whose conversions to Christianity were thought to be insincere, against “witches,” and in later decades against those accused of Protestant leanings. [Tomás de Torquemada](#), the notorious Grand Inquisitor of Spain, burned at the stake thousands of alleged heretics between 1487 and 1498. The Spanish Inquisition was not formally dissolved until 1834 (O’Malley, 1996).

The Dominican order provided most of the key inquisitors during the thirteenth century, and their leading theologian, [Thomas Aquinas](#), attempted to justify the practice of executing heretics in his [Summa Theologiae](#). To establish the legitimacy of executing heretics he quotes Titus 3:10-11:

After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions [a heretic], since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

Thomas assumes that the phrase “have nothing more to do with” legitimates the killing of human beings. He argues that since forgers of money are put to death by the civil authorities it is even more imperative for heretics to be killed because

. . . it is a much graver matter to corrupt faith (Aquinas, 1988, p. 256).

The Church hopes for the conversion of the heretic, thus allowing him to respond to a “first and second admonition.” But if he remains unrepentant, then the Church ceases to hope for his conversion and “looks to the salvation of others by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death.” Aquinas quotes Jerome in support of this course of action:

Cut off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole dough, the whole body, the whole flock burn, perish, rot, die.

The Waldensians were one of the groups particularly targeted for persecution by the Inquisition. Their principal crime was questioning the claim of the Roman Church to be the true Church of Christ. They sought to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as the avarice and moral laxity of the Roman Church by living lives of strict poverty and obedience to scripture. They went from town to town preaching sermons from biblical texts. Their success in gaining converts in many areas of Europe alarmed the papacy and led to official attempts at repression by the Inquisition. These attempts did not succeed in wiping out the Waldensians, however, but only in forcing them into an underground or a rural existence, which they maintained from the thirteenth century until the sixteenth, at which time many of their ideas entered into the mainstream of the [Protestant Reformation](#) (Dowley, 1995, pp. 327 - 329).

f. In the early fifteenth century, a somewhat similar reforming movement came into existence in Bohemia: the Hussites. Jan Hus, their leader, was greatly influenced by the writings of John Wyclif. He thus stressed scripture as the supreme authority over popes and cardinals. He criticized corruption in the clergy, worship of images, and “superstitious pilgrimages.” He was called before the Council of Constance in 1415 to defend himself against charges of heresy. Although he had been promised “safe passage,” he was burned at the stake without being given a full opportunity to defend his views (Dowley, 1995, p. 336). During the sixteenth century, many Protestants were killed by the Roman Church for holding views similar to those of the Hussites. William Tyndale, for example, was burned at the stake by imperial authorities in 1536, his crime being unauthorized translation of the Bible into vernacular English.

g. The magisterial reformers, [Martin Luther](#) and [John Calvin](#), were not much different from the Roman Catholic leaders of the day with regard to their attitudes toward violence. Luther’s teachings had indirectly contributed to the Peasants’ Revolt in Germany in the 1520s. Luther called for suppression of the rebellious peasants in these well-known words:

Let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog (Porter, 1974, p. 86).

In 1525, about 50,000 peasants were slaughtered⁵ by the German princes, urged on by Luther.

The Consistory in Calvin's Geneva burned at the stake the anti-trinitarian heretic Michael Servetus in 1553. Calvin is reputed to have favored beheading as a more humane form of execution in this case. Nevertheless, he approved of the Consistory's decision, and said that Servetus "cried like a Spaniard" as he was being burned.

h. The Catholics and the Protestants were united in their fear and loathing of the Anabaptists (forerunners of the Mennonites), who had the audacity to proclaim that Christians should not be in the business of killing. For teaching this they were killed. The following transcript of the trial of Anabaptist leader [Michael Sattler](#) conveys the atmosphere of the time very effectively. After giving a speech to the court outlining the basic points of Anabaptist doctrine, Sattler concludes:

Whereas, then, we have not acted contrary to God and the gospel, you will find that neither I nor my brethren and sisters have offended in word or deed against any authority. Therefore, ministers of God, if you have neither heard nor read the Word of God, send for the most learned men and for the sacred books of the Bible in whatsoever language they may be and let them confer with us in the Word of God. If they prove to us with the Holy Scriptures that we err and are in the wrong, we will gladly desist and recant and also willingly suffer the sentence and punishment for that of which we have been accused; but if no error is proven to us, I hope to God that you will be converted and receive instruction.

Upon this speech the judges laughed and put their heads together, and the town clerk of Ensisheim said:

Yes, you infamous, desperate rascal of a monk, should we dispute with you? The hangman will dispute with you, I assure you!

... One of the prisoners also said:

We must not depart from the truth.

The town clerk:

Yes, you desperate villain, you archheretic, I say, if there were no hangman here, I would hang you myself and be doing God a good service thereby.

... The judges having returned to the room, the sentence was read. It was as follows:

In the case of the attorney of His Imperial Majesty vs. Michael Sattler, judgment is passed that Michael Sattler shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall lead him to the place

⁵ See: [German Peasants' War - Wikipedia](#)

of execution and cut out his tongue, then forge him fast to a wagon and thereon with red-hot tongs twice tear pieces from his body; and after he has been brought outside the gate, he shall be plied five times more in the same manner . . .

After this had been done in the manner prescribed, he was burned to ashes as a heretic. His fellow brethren were executed with the sword, and the sisters drowned. His wife, also after being subjected to many entreaties, admonitions, and threats, under which she remained steadfast, was drowned a few days afterward (Hunston, 1957, pp. 141 -144).

Scenes such as this were repeated many times during the sixteenth century, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Anabaptists, who were perceived as dangerous heretics attacking the very foundations of Western Christian culture. Indeed, the Anabaptists were attacking these foundations, insofar as they were generated by a scapegoat mechanism rather than the teachings of Christ.

i. Violence between Catholics and Protestants occurred sporadically during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, erupting finally on a grand scale in the [Thirty Years War](#) (1618-1648) (Dowley, 1995, p. 427). During this period the Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Empire entered into battles with the Protestant armies of Bohemia, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. Success and defeat ebbed and flowed for both sides for many years. Most of the fighting took place in Germany, resulting in widespread devastation. Historians estimate that the overall population of Germany was reduced by fifteen to twenty percent. Later in the war the Catholic armies of France entered into war with the Catholic armies of the Empire, for motives that were more political than religious.

j. The [American Civil War](#) took place between 1861 and 1865. Historians estimate that 620,000 persons died in the war (Litwack, 1996). On both sides there were Christian soldiers ministered to and encouraged by chaplains who claimed that God was on their side.

k. In the 20th century, about 110 millions were slaughtered in two Great World Wars, and hundreds of lesser conflicts. Christian chaplains were found in all countries under Christian sway fully supportive of their nation's war efforts. When for instance President Truman watched the detonation in the Nevada desert of the world's first nuclear bomb, he declared it was the greatest event in the history of the human race! Now Truman was at times a Baptist Sunday School teacher who supposedly believed in the Resurrection . . .

Shortly after the first test explosion, two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, under Truman's authority, and with subsequent full blessing of American Protestant, Evangelical, and Catholic churches, instantly killing about 120,000 civilian men, women, and children in those cities. A few months earlier, with similar support by Allied Christians the world over, 100,000 civilian men, women, and children were slaughtered in one night of a conventional bombing raid on Tokyo, Japan.

In addition, over eighty Japanese cities, and forty-two German cities, for several years, were bombed regularly. The targets were primarily residential and civilian, not military and industrial. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children lost their lives.

[Father George Zabelka](#) was the Catholic chaplain with the US Army air force who blessed the men who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. He said this in a [Sojourners](#) interview, August, 1980⁶:

The mainline Christian churches still teach something that Christ never taught or even hinted at, namely the just war theory, a theory that to me has been completely discredited theologically, historically, and psychologically.

So as I see it, until the various churches within Christianity repent and begin to proclaim by word and deed what Jesus proclaimed in relation to violence and enemies, there is no hope for anything other than ever-escalating violence and destruction.

Theologian [Richard Hays](#) in his major work entitled [The Moral Vision of the New Testament](#) (1996), states:

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 (p. 343).

If the essence of the “law”—of how we should live, according to Jesus is *justice, mercy and faithfulness* (Matthew 23:23—compare to Micah 6:8, high water mark of OT spirituality), the church stands overwhelmingly guilty of faithlessness on the issue of violence.

Spiritual Origin of Violence

Violence is not necessarily found in all human societies past or present. It is possible that widespread violence, developing into what one author calls a “Domination System” (Wink, 1992), emerged in human history only after a certain degree of societal density, complexity and conflict had been reached.

According to [René Girard](#), however, who has been studying violence and its cultural origins during the past 40 years, violence is basic to human society from its earliest beginnings. Violence within a given society would build up to a certain point, then erupt sometimes into uncontrolled mayhem. The impetus towards violence arises from what Girard calls “mimetic desire”: imitating the desire of another. So for example, a child in the nursery picks up a toy, and suddenly another child in the nursery wants it. And violence erupts! This is how Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's classic got his fence painted! It is also the story of Jacob's repeated run-ins with Esau in the Bible.

Violence often follows from this “mimetic desire”—this covetousness. As the biblical writer James puts it succinctly:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight (4:1 & 2).

⁶ See the *Sojourners* article: [I Was Told It Was Necessary](#)'.

According to Girard, the origin of violence is as simple, yet as profound, as our desires going unchecked until they explode into violence.

The biblical story of the first murder is a classic illustration of this: Cain desires what his brother has—God’s favour. And he kills for it. But of course alienation, not relationship, results. Girard argues convincingly that all culture arises from a “founding murder, preserved for us worldwide in all cultural mythologies.

Universal Responses to Violence: Scapegoat Mechanism

Girard goes on to explain that, once violence has erupted, it threatens the well-being of the community. So a scapegoat must be found to siphon off the violence. In most societies, religious institutions traditionally served to create and/or oversee a “scapegoat mechanism” by which the scapegoat could be identified and sacrificed. All according to a strict ritual.

Religion is therefore, according to Girard, organized violence in the service of tranquillity. Religion covers up the sacrificial mechanism by means of myth, ritual, and prohibition (Wink, 1992, p. 146).

And humanity is thereby inescapably religious, even in this present Western most “secular” of all eras.

In our secularized West, with the demise of religious institutions widely influencing society, the criminal justice system in fact usually takes the place of religion in operating the scapegoat mechanism (Redekop, 1993). The courthouse may be seen as the modern cathedral, perpetuating myths about crime, following elaborate rituals, and acting on legislative prohibitions of certain behaviour. But “[*Everybody Does It!*](#)”: crime is in fact opportunistically committed by the vast majority of Canadians, according to a major study by Canadian criminologist, [**Thomas Gabor**](#), 1994. So the scapegoating of only certain criminals for punishment is extremely selective. For instance, only one to three percent of all criminals who actually commit Criminal Code of Canada offences go to prison.

A further problem is, the scapegoat mechanism only siphons off the violence for a time. It in no way is capable of removing violence altogether, for violence in fact is foundational to it. This is the dilemma of all human cultures built upon a scapegoat mechanism. It is the ongoing participation in the Babylonian creation myth that violence is legitimate: so long as it is appropriately channelled through a religious mechanism or a secular means such as criminal justice, with all its prohibitions, rituals, and myths. Violence never removes, rather it breeds, violence.

Jesus’ Alternative to Violence

Jesus offered and modelled a ‘third way’ in response to violence that takes one from a flight or fight response, to transformative “just peacemaking” initiatives in the face of violence. Paul Anderson sums this up well in an essay entitled, “Jesus and Peace.”

Finally, Walter Wink argues that these instructions about turning the other cheek, etc. must be read in light of Matthew 5:39a, which is often mistranslated “Do not resist an evildoer.” Wink judges that a more correct interpretation of the text *does not negate resistance, but only violent resistance*; what Jesus forbids is ‘to resist *violently*, to revolt or rebel, to engage in an insurrection [1987, p. 185]. One might also amplify the sentence to read, ‘But I tell you, do not counterstrike the evildoer; but if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and face him, offering also the other.’ The implication is that evil cannot be overcome by evil means. When one responds violently to violence, evil wins a double victory. First, its essential nature remains unexposed and thereby it prolongs its life. Second, it succeeds in seducing those with good intentions into its way. History is full of examples of revolutionaries who became what they had originally hated: oppressors. Jesus’ strategy brings true reform and avoids this tragic end. Says Wink,

His way aims at converting the opponent; failing that, it hopes for accommodation, where the opponent is willing to make some changes simply to get the protesters off his back. But if that fails too, nonviolence entails coercion: the opponent is forced to make a change rather than suffer the loss of power, even though he remains hostile. But Jesus’ way does not employ *violent* coercion [1987, p. 192].

The strength of Wink’s interpretation of Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence is that it clearly portrays the third way Jesus instructed his disciples to follow. Jesus advocated neither a fight nor a flight response to domination, but a nonviolent, redemptive engagement of the powers that be. While he did not aspire to be a political leader in the popular sense, his teaching was thoroughly political in its implications. It aimed at nothing short of creating a new earth in which God’s just and loving will would be done as perfectly as in heaven (Anderson, 1994, pp. 118 & 119).

But there is a profound tension, as indicated, between this way of Jesus lived and taught, and the ensuing New Testament documents in line with that way, and church history that unfolded since in response to Jesus.

Richard Hays puts the issue pointedly:

This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience* (p. 341).

In an entire chapter devoted to whether New Testament teaching in any way warrants Christians to support violence to achieve justice, Hays concludes:

Our exegetical illustration of Matthew 5:38 - 48 has led to the conclusion that the passage teaches a norm of nonviolent love of enemies . . . The question that we must now consider is how Matthew’s vision of the peaceful community fits into the larger witness of the canonical New Testament. Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the

Mount's teaching on nonviolence, 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 Barth observed—is to underscore how impressively univocal is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point (p. 329).

There is one consistent New Testament voice on the theme of violence: *its rejection!*

Why then, if the New Testament is so consistent in its witness for nonviolent peacemaking, should commitment to nonviolence be the overwhelming minority position of the Christian church? Hays again:

One reason . . . 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).”

What ever happened to following Jesus on the issue of violence?

What About Violence in the Bible?

Once, when I was teaching a Sunday School class on the Luke 6 passage, which specifically enjoins love for the enemy, and indicates that God is merciful to the wicked every bit as much as to the good, a man in exasperation said that Jesus may say that in *this* passage, but there are lots of other passages where he could get the kind of message towards criminals he wanted: retribution pure and simple!

Another time, in an evening forum on capital punishment organized by a criminology class in a community college, I was asked to present a Christian perspective. Three others gave varying views. During the response time, a man indicated he was directing his remarks towards me. He began by quoting the King James Version of Matthew 23:23:

*Ye [Mr. Northey] have omitted the weightier matters of the law, **judgment...!***

He fairly thundered the last word, then proceeded with a diatribe against me and my ilk so full of invective (I often called it *vituperative diatribe*) that, had capital punishment been on the books for misinterpretation of Scripture, I think by his reckoning I would have been on death row.

The point is, both these people are right. They are drawing on wellsprings of violence attributed to God in the Bible. (Though Matthew 23:23 actually continues with the words “mercy, and faithfulness,” drawing on Micah 6:8, which specifically calls God’s people to practise “justice”—the preferred translation, not judgment—for the poor, the widow, etc., instead of scapegoating!)

There are, for instance,

. . . six hundred passages of explicit violence in the Hebrew Bible, one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, a hundred passages where Yahweh expressly commands others to kill for no apparent reason... Violence . . . is easily the most mentioned activity and central theme of the Hebrew Bible (Wink, 1992, p. 146).

And there are portions of Revelation and other texts scattered about the New Testament with a violent tinge or avowal.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament embraces the scapegoat mechanism. The beginning of the Hebrew religion is the scapegoating of an animal instead of a human being, in the surrogate sacrifice of a ram instead of Isaac. Animal sacrifice in the Old Testament is never far from human sacrifice. There is a move away from this scapegoat mechanism, especially during the time of the later prophets.⁷ For instance Micah identifies animal sacrifice as child sacrifice disguised in the very passage Jesus draws on in Matthew 23. Hosea rejects all sacrifice except sincere conversion of the heart.

The New Testament however teaches in John 1 and Hebrews 1 that we read the Bible through the work and words of Jesus. Jesus is our "hermeneutical" or interpretative lens enabling us rightly to understand God's Word. And it is in Jesus that we meet sacrifice only to find in his teaching and through the Cross its complete rejection. "It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice," Jesus says straightforwardly, quoting from Hosea 6:6 (Matthew 9:13). Jesus moves

from the logic of the scapegoat—that of the compulsory sacrifice to the logic of the Lamb of God—that of the freely offered sacrifice of the innocent one, the righteous one (Barbé, 1989, p. 6).

According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus is the last scapegoat sent to reconcile us, once for all, to God (Hebrews 10:5 - 10 and others). According to I John, Jesus was the

. . . atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (2:2).

No one ever need atone for sins—his or hers—again!

Hays writes:

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. Just as the New Testament texts

⁷ See Barbé, 1989, pp. 24ff.

render judgments superseding the Old Testament requirements of circumcision and dietary laws, just as the New Testament's forbidding of divorce supersedes the Old Testament's permission of it, so also Jesus' explicit teaching and example of nonviolence reshapes our understanding of God and of the covenant community in such a way that killing enemies is no longer a justifiable option. The sixth antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount marks the hermeneutical watershed. As we have noted, the Old Testament distinguishes the obligation of loving the neighbor (that is, the fellow Israelite) from the response to enemies:

[B]ut I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

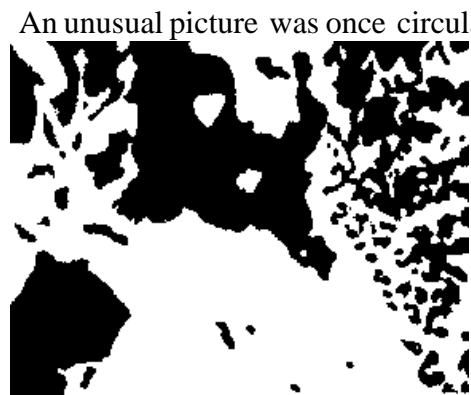
Once that word has been spoken to us and perfectly embodied in the story of Jesus' life and death, we cannot appeal back to Samuel as a counterexample to Jesus. Everything is changed by the cross and resurrection. We now live in a situation in which we confess that

. . . in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Those who have been entrusted with such a message will read the Old Testament in such a way that its portrayals of God's mercy and eschatological restoration of the world will take precedence over its stories of justified violence (pp. 336 & 7).

Jesus shatters for all time the legitimacy of the scapegoat mechanism. From his time on, no enemy may ever be put outside the circle of God's or our love. Love in the New Testament in fact means *the real-life embracing of the other to make that person a friend.*

The Biblical Interpretation Dilemma



The actual image

An unusual picture was once circulated around our Church when I was a kid. I remember it well. The brief notation below the picture explained that a man had been travelling along the highway after a pristine snowfall sparkled its brightness everywhere under a glorious sun. At one point he stopped, and noticed an unusual play of shadow against the backdrop of the freshly fallen snow. Being an amateur photographer with his own dark room, he took out his camera and snapped a few pictures of the strange phenomenon. He was astounded when, upon developing them, one in particular displayed an amazing likeness to the traditional artists' depictions of the face of Jesus. We all were invited to see what he saw.

What I saw first however, as did most, were dark blotches against a snow-white background. There was no face of any kind to see. Except there was! It took some doing, some adjusting, but finally I got it! I saw the face too!

Then, what was fascinating after that was, no matter how I looked at the picture, sideways glance, upside down, back to front even when held against a clear window, I never failed immediately to recognize the face of Jesus in that photo.

We all know this phenomenon. There is a technical term for it: [*stereoscopy*](#).

But some never did see the face. Their eyes simply never adjusted. They even doubted that we who saw really “saw.”

Theology means literally, a word, or words about God. What theology really is concerning is creating for us, the believer, an accurate *word-picture* of God’s face. Unfortunately, there are no artists’ drawings of the real face of Jesus that have come down to us. So we have to discover the face of Jesus, and thereby the face of God, we Christians say, somehow in the written word—the Bible.⁸ The data of Scripture, in ongoing dialogue with Christians’ interpretations through the ages and our faith community’s understandings today all help us throughout our lives to form an ever sharper image of God.

Once an editor (in his 50’s) of a theological piece I had written and was publishing said to me as the task was completed, words to the effect:

I have never been able to shake a picture of God I have had since my childhood. That picture is one of a God who is stern, harsh, totally demanding, punitive, a ‘Hangin’ Judge’ ready to condemn me severely for anything I do wrong, and likely to relegate me to hellfire should I ever so slightly step out of line.

He was a Christian, to be sure, and a faithful church-goer, he acknowledged, but he wasn’t entirely sure that spending an eternity with such a “god” would not be more like his understanding of hell!

The dilemma we are in can be put as an analogy. The Bible is like a monstrous jigsaw puzzle, with a vast number of individual pieces to it. It’s in fact the Ultimate Cosmic Jigsaw Puzzle, we Christians believe! I have seen once in my life the kind of jigsaw puzzle I am comparing the Bible to: one with identically shaped pieces. In the puzzle I saw, they were all squares. Now, it was a daunting enough task to put the puzzle together that I saw with the original box and the picture on it. Try doing an identically shaped pieces jigsaw puzzle sometime! But what if there were rival box cover pictures, and debate about which was the authentic one?

I am suggesting that the biblical data is precisely like that kind of jigsaw puzzle with identically shaped pieces. I’m suggesting further that we would have no hope of putting it together at all were it not for the face of Jesus we discover in the New Testament revelation, which becomes for

⁸ Though of course, *Jesus is the ultimate Word of God*.

us the ultimate picture of the face of God⁹. I am suggesting that all other box covers than that of Jesus as seen in the New Testament revelation, are inadequate or wrong. But I am suggesting further that it is nonetheless difficult to see the face of Jesus properly. For some they “see,” but all that is seen are “dark blotches”: *a God still of violence*. And I think that one in that case does not really “see.” Piece together the jigsaw puzzle when one only sees dark blotches, and one’s picture of God will turn out entirely differently from doing it with the face of Jesus seen aright!

The Christian and War: Reflections on “[Saving Private Ryan](#)”

“War is hell,” observed Civil War [General William Tecumseh Sherman](#). And [Steven Spielberg](#) dipped us right into its fiery midst in his 1998 Summer release.

War is indeed hell. Yet, in the long history of the Christian Church, apart from the earliest era, every war engaged in throughout Christendom has been supported by the Church on both sides of the conflict. How in the name of Jesus can this be?

What, for starters, of Christ’s express words?:

Love your enemies (Matthew 5, Luke 6).

Further, how can Christians do an end run around Jesus’ explicit teaching by reverting to Old Testament endorsement of war when Jesus flatly said?:

So **in everything** [*except war?*], do to others [*except your enemies?*—see Matthew. 5:43ff] what you would have them do to you, **for this sums up the Law and the Prophets** (Matthew 7:12).;

. . . ‘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 [*except your enemies?*] as yourself.’ **All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments** (Matt 22:37-40).

Or how can Christians ignore other New Testament voices such as the Apostle Paul’s?:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another [*except your enemies?*], for he who loves his fellowman [*except his enemies?*] 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

⁹ And whenever we see a conflict between the Bible (written Word) and Jesus (Incarnate Word), Jesus as said, is the only ultimate Word of God. See on this [Brian Zahnd](#)’s meditation in [Clarion Call to Love: Essays in Gratitude to Archbishop Lazar Puhalo](#), Chapter 4. Zahnd argues that Jesus stands in judgment of the text when at odds with his teaching. “*But I say unto you . . .*” is Jesus’ direct challenge. Jesus overshadows as wisdom oracle Moses and Elijah (*the Law and the Prophets*) as seen in the mystical Mount of Transfiguration scene.:

Jesus gives us a new ethic of life affirming mercy, which sets aside the old ethic that supported death penalties. Biblicists who desire to condemn sinners to death can quote the Bible by citing Moses. But Jesus says something else. That is why I was so appalled when a well-known evangelical leader wrote an opinion piece for CNN defending the death penalty by citing Moses, yet never once mentioned Jesus. We cannot create Christian ethics while ignoring Christ!

one rule: 'Love your neighbor [*except your enemies?*] as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor [*except your enemies?*]. **Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law** (Romans 13:8-10).

Or what of James' pithy statement?:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor [*except your enemies?*] as yourself,' **you are doing right** (James 2:8)."

And John's witness?:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother [*except his non-Christian enemies?*], he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother [*except his enemies?*], whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: **Whoever loves God must also love his brother** [*except his enemies?*] (I Jn 4:19-21).

What kind of exegetical gymnastics are utilized to dodge such overwhelming and consistent New Testament testimony?

Is it possible that all these witnesses, Jesus included, did not read their Old Testaments? Or is it likelier that many Christians have not read their New Testaments? Are John 1 and Hebrews 1 *not* really in the Bible, both of which point to the primacy of Jesus as the final revelation of God's will?:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Heb 1:1- 2)

Like Timothy, I was raised on Scripture. From a child I could recite lots of it, including the all-time favourite verse of evangelicalism, John 3:16—in my case in the majestic King James Version:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

I discovered only later to my shock that apparently John 3:16 has a footnote inserted into many Christians' Bibles. It is never quoted out loud, however. But it is obviously no less binding dogma. After "world," "whosoever," and "perish," the footnote reads:

Except our enemies!

They must in fact yield or indeed "perish"! Yet, I always was told it was the "Liberals," masters of the exception clause, who played fast and loose with Scripture . . .

Watching Spielberg's film, with the overwhelming random slaughter and maiming, it occurred to me again that *war is the most complete inversion of evangelism imaginable!* Not good seed, but

bullets and bombs are scattered with abandon, thereby utterly inverting the evangelistic mandate. One means “life abundant,” the other delivers “death indiscriminate.” In excess of 110 millions have been annihilated in largely Church-endorsed wars this century alone. I doubt if all evangelists worldwide for the entire 20th century could add up their collective catch to match that harvest of death. Yet, many evangelists in their work of “saving souls” have supported the unspeakable carnage. *Is this not profoundly disturbing?! What could be more blatantly anti-Christian? Why has no major evangelistic voice spoken out?*¹⁰

On the contrary, many evangelists, and all military chaplains, have preached to the troops at war in hopes to see them “made right with God” since tomorrow they might die. But when have those same evangelists and chaplains heeded Jesus by preaching the Gospel, *lest tomorrow they might kill*? How can their converts *possibly* be right with God when they destroy the neighbour (I John 4)? Or can “love of brother” somehow be twisted to mandate “slaughter of enemies”? And is such twisting the work of God or the work of the evil one (“*Did God really say... (Gen. 3:1ff?)*”? Do evangelists and chaplains know better than Jesus? Did not Jesus *always* call for death of self, *never* death of the other? Are there not *two* “greatest commandments,” not just one? Is not love of God only *half* the Gospel?

What of the Apostle Paul’s declaration?:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

Is war not the ultimate worldliness, a “total depravity,” according to the New Testament? How can something so patently anti-Christian be so blessed by so many Christians throughout so many centuries? What kind of awesome brainwashing, what potent spell, is at work here? Dare we call it, simply, sin?

Is it possible that on this issue we have for centuries tended to be equally blind as another group of believers to whom Jesus said?:

Why is my language not clear to you? [How could Jesus’ language about “love of enemies” be any clearer?] Because you are unable to hear what I say. 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. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me (John 8:43-45)!”

Now the truth that sets us free (John 8:32) is obedience to God’s will summed up in the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22; Mark 12; I John): love of God and love of neighbour. As believers, failure to love in this way is to invite Jesus’ warning:

¹⁰ *Please let me know of such.* Please also see my: [Christian Pacifism and Its Cultured Naysayers](#), February 13, 2022.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matthew 7:21-24).

Can it be, that after all, many proclaimed followers of Jesus are in fact not? Is it possible that many Christians who claim "...not I, but Christ..." (Galatians 2:20, KJV)" on the contrary embrace religious nepotism, of which patriotism is its most hideous expression? For all our protestations, despite our reputed allegiance to what "The Bible says!," do we in the end deny it like the "Liberals"? Have many Christians been far closer to the spirit of Pharisaism, one of murderous prevarication, than we ever dare to admit (John 8)? Does this spirit not directly contradict the "weightier matters of the law": love of God and neighbour (Matthew 23:23, echoing Micah 6:8)? Was Gandhi right?:

The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians."

Is it thinkable that we Bible-believing Christians stand in danger one day of hearing Jesus' words:

. . . 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41).' " , for "... 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these [except our enemies?], you did not do for me (Matt 25:45).'

Is that not hell: the failure to love (Jesus in) the neighbour and the enemy (Matthew 5 - 7, Luke 6, I John 4)?

War is indeed hell. In the movie, Captain John Miller comments:

For every man I kill, the further I get from home.

Of course! A Nazi defendant at the post-War Nuremberg Trials said:

You have defeated us Nazis. But the spirit of Nazism has arisen like a Phoenix amongst you.

Precisely! We always become what we hate. When the U.S. dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, and obliterated instantaneously 100,000 lives, then three days later thousands more were slaughtered in Nagasaki (in sheer death-dealing magnitude utterly dwarfing this past decade's Oklahoma City bombing), President Harry Truman declared:

That was the greatest event in human history!

This from a lay Baptist preacher and Sunday School teacher . . . Astounding! What, in God's name, could be a more blatant denial of the Resurrection than those bombs and that statement?! *The Resurrection alone is the greatest event in human history!* And it means everything war does not: life abundant and everlasting. What business did that Bible-believing Christian have in so

utterly contradicting the very centrepiece of Christian faith? And did not the majority of Bible-believing Christians at the time cheer Truman on? Do not the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians still applaud the continued development of post-War weaponry and its deployment, which, in 1996 dollars in the U.S. alone, has amounted to 5.5 trillion dollars and countless lives for whom Christ died snuffed out? Where are the leading Christian voices opposing this anti-Christ obscenity?

Why, in Jesus' name, are they silent? Why?! "In God we trust"? *Balderdash!*

"Home" (Captain Miller) ultimately is where love is. Where God is. Its opposite is hell. So hell is also war! For hell is in the end the obstinate refusal to love God and neighbour; the endless attempt at doing end runs around the two greatest commandments (Matthew 25). The biblical witness is: the only test case for love of God is love of neighbour (I John 4). And the test case for love of neighbour is love of enemies (Matthew 5 - 7, Luke 6). Failure to love the enemy is failure to love God is hell.

Spielberg gets it right: war is hell, and (in this case) hell is war. The question begs asking: What business have Christians ever had propagating hell?

In response to some of the above material, I received this terse response from a Christian editor I know:

Hi, Wayne:

Sorry to take so long to get back to you this time around. We decided not to use your article for reasons of length (too long!), style (too many rhetorical questions) and tone (too harsh).

Thanks for going to the trouble of thinking this through and writing down your thoughts.

My simple addition to why it was rejected:

And argument: too true?

The Christian and Hell: Theological Moorings of Violence in the Image of God

The doctrine of hell necessarily arises in the context of a Christian consideration of violence. For a theological discussion of violence inevitably brings us to the most extreme instance of violence in God, if the traditional, most dominant, doctrine of hell is indeed biblical - *eternal conscious punishment of the unbeliever*. I will do this by interacting with a recently published book, [*The Other Side of the Good News*](#), by [Larry Dixon](#).

The central conclusion of the book in the author's words is that there is an

. . . adequacy [in] the traditional view of hell . . . and that alternative views do not adequately reflect the scriptural data concerning hell . . . Pointing out the weaknesses in

the three alternative positions to hell does not in itself prove the truth of the *traditional eternal conscious punishment view* (pp. 172 & 173, emphasis added).

Dixon continues at that point to

“ . . . set out four areas in which the traditional position enjoys biblical, as well as rational, support.”, after allowing that the traditional view “might also be erroneous (p. 173).”

I shall return to that possibility.

Widely-read evangelical author [J.I. Packer](#) in the Foreword underscores the author’s conclusions:

To believe what the Bible appears to say about human destiny apart from the grace of God is a bitter pill indeed, and no one should wonder that attempts are made to explore alternative understandings of God’s revelation on this topic. It is suggested that the Bible is unclear, or incoherent, or inconsistent, or untrustworthy, when it speaks of the outcome of judgment after death, or alternatively that virtually the whole church has for two thousand years misunderstood the texts. I do not think so, nor does Dr. Dixon . . . For one I am grateful for his work, and commend it to all who are willing to be biblically rational on this sombre subject (p. 7).

The implication is clear throughout the book and from Dr. Packer’s words: one is simply *unbiblical* to deny the traditional view that *hell is eternal conscious punishment for all unbelievers who fail to accept Jesus Christ as personal Saviour this side of death*. As the author says at the end of the Introduction:

May we be ready to pay [the] price to bring lost people to Christ so that they won’t spend eternity on *The Other Side of the Good News* (p. 14).

Dixon spends the bulk of the book refuting three alternative views so designated by him. In his words:

Some today suggest that all without exception will be saved, whether they want to be or not (*universalism*, discussed in chapter 2). Others argue that hell is God’s consuming of the wicked (*annihilationism*, addressed in chapter 3), not His eternally tormenting them. Still others hold forth the hope that death is not the end of opportunity for redemption, but perhaps a door to future chances for salvation (*post-mortem conversion*, the subject of chapter 4) (p. 13).

The author does not wince at taking on theological heavyweights such as Karl Barth, C. H. Dodd, and Nels Ferré (all described by Dixon as outside evangelical orthodoxy). He also challenges evangelical heavyweight theologians such as Clark Pinnock, John Stott, and Donald Bloesch. Dixon in particular bemoans the erosion of evangelical theology as seen in these and other evangelical leaders’ views of the traditional doctrine of hell. He writes:

The evangelical Christian, who can’t forget hell, often seems, in boxing terms, to be up against the ropes (p. 149).

He describes the buffeting such an evangelical Christian endures from the cults who scorn hell, and says,

He then returns to his corner for some encouragement and promptly receives several left hooks from his own manager . . . One is hardly surprised that some young fighters for the faith seem ready to throw in the towel (p. 149).

His plea is poignant; one can feel his pain as a “fighter for the faith” at this sense of betrayal. Throughout much of the final chapter, he critiques in particular [Clark Pinnock](#), whom Dixon quotes on p. 149:

[E]verlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom He does not even allow to die.

Dixon’s dilemma is clearly stated:

Obviously, no follower of Christ wants to be guilty of presenting God as one more heinous than Hitler. However, if the Bible is clear on this issue, the Christian must *not* throw in the towel (pp. 149 & 150).

And the author proceeds to present God in his holy hatred of sinners precisely in those terms: *as one more heinous than Hitler!* The crucial conditional fulcrum for the entire thesis is Dixon’s statement: “*if the Bible is clear on this issue.*” Dixon and Packer, and indeed a host of Christian voices throughout the ages (though with significant exceptions in every age—some of whom are adduced by Dixon—say the Bible contains indeed precisely such clarity about hell *as a place of eternal conscious punishment.*

I am compelled to respond to Dixon’s work because of my own vocation: for over 25 years I have ministered in criminal justice, and have wrestled from the outset with thinking biblically God’s justice thoughts after him, in particular with reference to judgment and punishment, including the doctrine of hell. I have become convinced over the years that

God’s justice is predominantly, and normatively, redemptive or restorative in intention (Marshall, 1991, p. 1).

How can one presume to fault this book’s conclusions shared, as Packer rightly indicates, by majority Christians throughout church history? *I do so aware of the danger that my critique in part can be turned on me too.* We are all inclined to wrongly “handle the word of truth.” (See II Timothy 2:15.) I will allude to the dark blotches analogy I have already mentioned, and one other below.

Dixon seems to look at a “dark blotches” violently punitive picture of Jesus on a box cover that was the wrong choice (a *heresy* in its original Greek meaning), a failure to “see” the real face right before his eyes. That differs, in the end profoundly, from the picture of Jesus who exemplified and said:

But love your enemies, do good to them . . . Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, *because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:35-36, emphasis added)

(Interestingly, Dixon does not once in his book refer to this clarion call of Jesus based upon this “box cover” portrait of who God fundamentally is: *love*. He has good company: [C.S. Lewis](#) fails in this too. Please see Footnote 10.)

Dixon writes:

One’s doctrine of the final judgment of the wicked is a direct reflection of one’s doctrine of God (p. 165).

Indeed. And one’s doctrine or *picture* of God—the box cover—is ultimately seen in Jesus (John 1 and Hebrews 1). Gandhi said of Christians and nonviolence generally,

The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians.

As Richard Hays has been quoted earlier, *it is possible* for “virtually the whole church” to be wrong (*pace* J. I. Packer). With all due respect, and with profound sadness, it has been wrong about Christian nonviolence. Dixon’s “traditional doctrine of hell” is a special category of that same majority Christendom error. The picture on the box of God in Christ for Dixon is *sadly one of ultimate violence*. I suggest that *only* if “Jesus” is a “dark blotches” box cover can one agree with Dixon’s assertion:

Jesus is our primary source for the [traditional] doctrine of hell (p. 147).

The nub of the issue is our picture or vision of God in Christ.

One evangelical New Testament theologian, [Christopher Marshall](#), in a significant draft manuscript¹¹ on hell in a forthcoming book on biblical restorative justice (my area of ministry), writes:

Jesus shows that those who think of God in terms of strict distributive or retributive justice *fundamentally misunderstand God* (Matthew 20:1 - 16) (Marshall, 1999, p. 17, emphasis added).

Yet, I suggest, this is the central “dark blotches” misunderstanding of the picture on the puzzle cover of God in the book under review. God is depicted as ultimately violently retributive towards the wicked. On the contrary, Marshall, in surveying the biblical evidence, writes in the conclusion of his paper:

¹¹ See my review of the published book: [Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment](#).

For our purposes the point to notice is that God's final word is not retribution but restoration, the re-creation of heaven and earth so that sin, suffering, sickness and death are no more (1999, p.21).

God's ultimate word biblically is, indeed, nonviolent, all-inclusive love, *which subsumes all biblical categories of wrath, judgment and punishment!* I submit gently, but firmly that, to miss that is to miss, simply, the Good News.

The second analogy I mentioned to Dixon is of a document written in Roman script so that an English speaker can read the letters, but the reader does not know a word of the language. It is crucial nonetheless that the reader understand the message in the document. So she phones a friend who speaks the language fluently and reads the document out loud over the phone, seeking an accurate translation. The native language speaker in exasperation finally says that she can barely understand anything at all, *for all the accents seem to fall on the wrong syllables!* In reading Dixon's fifth chapter years ago, and later the entire book, I respectfully submit that he consistently puts the accents on mainly the wrong biblical syllables.

One example suffices: Dixon's central, I believe, misuse in Chapter Five of the story of the rich man and Lazarus to discern explicit details about the nature of eternal punishment for the wicked. He quotes approvingly one author who says:

. . . while it was not Jesus' primary intent here to teach us about the nature of the intermediate state, it is unlikely that He would mislead us on this subject (p. 133).

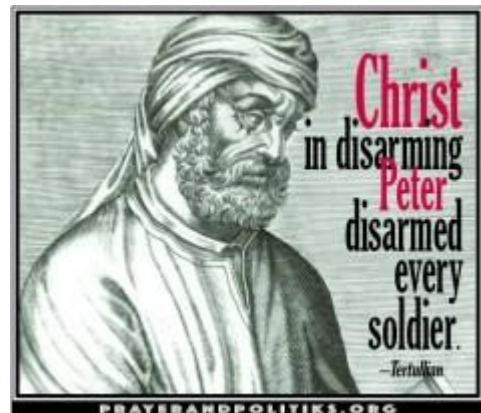
Really? One could likewise say (and some amazingly do!) that Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:31¹², endorses war despite his repeated nonviolent call to "love your enemies," or his words to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane about two swords being enough (Luke 22:38) was a call for disciples to take up arms despite Matthew 26:52 where Jesus tells Peter to sheathe his sword (thereby disarming the church forever, commented Church Father Tertullian!) Repeatedly, in this reviewer's estimation, Dixon (and yes, most Christians throughout the ages!) puts the accents in the Scriptures he adduces in mostly the wrong places.

In this respect, Chris Marshall says:

But it is crucial to recognize... the *figurative, parabolic nature of the language* used to describe realities which, *ex hypothesi* [in accordance with the stated thesis], lie outside human experience (p. 14).

He then quotes one writer who says:

Such language is 'figurative and connotative rather than denotative and literalistic' . . . To imagine some kind of cosmic torture-chamber where the lost suffer endless or prolonged retribution is to miss the



Please click on image for early church nonviolent witness

¹² Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?

figurative, apocalyptic nature of these utterances, as well as the paraenetic or pastoral intention behind them (p. 14).

I contend that Dixon sustains just such a profound misreading of biblical texts throughout his entire book.

So Marshall urges with reference to specific details about the fate of those who reject God that

Perhaps a humble agnosticism is the wisest option . . .

Neither Jesus nor Paul supply specify about the fate of the wicked, concludes Stephen Travis (1986). Neither should we. *And therefore I will not speculate further*. I do not have an alternative view. God knows, and that is enough! That Dixon presses the biblical texts beyond what they were meant to bear seems a singularly consistent fault of his hermeneutic. It is so often what non-Christian cults do—ironically enough given his critique of the cults’ critique of traditional Christian teachings on hell!

But Dixon will have none of this, and writes an entire treatise based upon a consistent misreading of the founding texts. How can this be? A book-length treatment of precisely this issue with reference to misguided Christian retributive views in criminal justice is Timothy Gorringer’s [*God’s Just Vengeance*](#). At one point Gorringer asks, with reference to a pervasive and lengthy Christian tradition of retributive views towards “criminals”:

How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people (p. 5)?

Likewise, [Father George Zabelka](#), Chaplain to the 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb squadrons, upon repentance for blessing the murder of hundreds of thousands in an instant, wrote that the just war theory is “something that Christ never taught nor hinted at.” Yet almost all Christians have embraced just war and retributive justice theories throughout much of the Christian era. *Why, when it is biblically so unfounded?*

Similarly, while we both acknowledge that we follow the same Lord and equally take seriously the Bible, I could wish that Dixon would ponder more what he allows is at least possible, *that biblically the traditional view of hell*

might also be erroneous (p. 173).

In Jesus’ direct allusions to hell, not once are “unbelievers” in view, but always the religiously self-righteous. Disturbingly, Douglas Frank, an evangelical author (1986), characterizes evangelicalism as centrally prone towards being pharisaical.

We are the Pharisees of our time, if anyone is.,

he writes (p. 229).

A Baptist pastor friend puts it tellingly:

Every Sunday in the pulpit I stand in danger of leading my flock to hell.

In this reviewer's estimation, what is lacking in Dixon's reading of the biblical texts *is a Gospel imagination overwhelmed by grace*, which leads to a consequent theology of the subversion of all retribution and violence in God and humans. In short: Christian conversion is wanted. Like the White Witch in C.S. Lewis' [*The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*](#), Dixon seems unaware of the "deeper (James called it "royal"—James 2:8) law" of love on which

hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:34 - 40).

We sing after all "Amazing Grace," not "Amazing Justice," **Debbie Morris** points out at the end of her gripping story of kidnapping, rape, and survival, [*Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*](#) (1998). She gets it, Dixon does not.

It is apparently that stark. This is what Jesus often spoke of such as in Matthew 13:13ff (and elsewhere):

This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'

In Dixon's reading, grace seems to have been arrested mid-stream in favour of a horrible retributive justice for the wicked—which is exactly mercy's inversion. The author in interpreting Scripture on hell looks like the man in Matthew 18 who was forgiven an overwhelming debt, *yet doesn't get it at all*, and withholds forgiveness at the first opportunity! In reality, the text shows that the "forgiven" man apparently didn't really experience forgiveness. Or he would have been forgiving towards "even the . . . ungrateful and wicked (Luke 6:35).

Again, Dixon presents like Jonah who becomes furious at God for showing mercy to Ninevah. Yet, Jesus taught that a greater [in mercy] than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:41)!

Or the author sounds like the elder brother in the "Prodigal Father" story (Luke 5:11ff) who just cannot fathom the Father's unconditional mercy towards the wicked son. Dixon seemingly has no category for a consistent hermeneutic of grace. In his theology, *God's grace seems for a moment, but his wrath endures forever*, to invert Psalm 30:5. Sadly, he, and many interpreters like him, appear, like Saul, to have "given approval (Acts 8:1)" to the same sacrificial violence that Jesus castigated in Matthew 23:33 - 35:

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?

Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Jesus also *fell victim to this same violence!*

As Marshall says:

Throughout Christian history, the fear of being consigned to hell by a truly merciless God has fuelled and justified all manner of horrific violence (p. 6).

Dixon writes, in apparent approval of one such instance of “horrific violence,” the Gulf War:

A brave journalist who was in Baghdad when the bombs landed, cried out in his television report, ‘I have been in *hell!*’ As horrible as war is we would have to say to him, ‘No, you haven’t. If we understand Jesus correctly, war is only a small foreshadowing of that final condition of the forsaken (p. 14).

The grand and joyous paradox of the Gospel, for those with eyes to see the wildly liberating “picture on the box cover” is: *God’s final judgment is his mercy!*—just as the doctrine of original sin is a post-resurrection Christian doctrine of grace and forgiveness.

No contemporary biblical theologian this reviewer has read captures this eschatological insight better in fact than [James Alison](#) in [Raising Abel](#). The book is a sustained call for Christians through conversion to acquire an “eschatological imagination” that subverts ultimately an unchristian “apocalyptic imagination” such that

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).

Therefore,

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 (p. 175).

In the end, the greatest critique of Dixon’s thesis is simply this: *there is biblically no “other side of the good news”!* There is Good News, period! Hell too is embraced by God’s love. Dixon presents a “gospel” without good news that reads, *à la Four Spiritual Laws*, thus:

God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life . . . *But if you don’t buy in before death, God hates you, and has a horrible plan for your after-life!*

No genuine love affair human or divine is imaginable with that kind of time-limited vicious threat hanging over one’s head.

I could wish Dixon on this issue would return to Scripture with eyes to see and ears to hear - and recover a truly Gospel-soaked “eschatological imagination”. Chris Marshall, in personal comment to me wrote similarly:

I did have a look at Dixon's book . . . What a depressing piece!! It illustrates the problems in pulling out a single theme for analysis in isolation from the larger context of the biblical story (May 9, 1999, E-mail correspondence).

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*" (Romans 3:26). For, as Jesus said repeatedly (Matthew 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.' (Matthew 9:13).

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

A Brief Personal Story

I feel a personal sadness in critiquing Dixon's conclusions. On p. 178, he writes:

A former missionary friend, who has since moved away from the traditional doctrine of hell, said to me that 'God's *penultimate* word is *wrath*, but His *ultimate* word is *love*.'

I am that "former missionary friend." We served together doing evangelism in West Berlin from 1972 to 1974. The author's royal-we rejoinder to my statement was:

We would have to disagree (p. 178).

"We" did disagree at the time he was writing his book when I visited him; we disagreed after he gave me Chapter Five to read in manuscript form; we still disagreed in subsequent correspondence. Finally, he simply stopped corresponding . . .

Finding Our True Selves and Jesus Invariably in the Other

The trinitarian doctrine of God's creation of humanity suggests a self connected always to the other. Not an "autonomous self," rather a "person-in-community" is the biblical view of who humans are. An "individual self" is in fact a biblical oxymoron, a contradiction. We are not ourselves until we find ourselves in the other is the biblical perspective. Jesus simply upped the ante: he said finding ourselves in the other is still heresy (a false choice) if it does not move beyond egoism and nepotism (me and mine first). The test case for Jesus of a person's becoming a true self is love of enemy. Failure in this is, he taught, *metaphysical suicide*. Further, Jesus made it clear that becoming our true selves happens only as we discover Jesus in the other. Put differently: finding Jesus means finding our true selves. It also means it is impossible to find Jesus if we do not find ourselves in the other, supremely in the enemy. Failure to love the neighbour/enemy therefore is failure to love Jesus and ourselves.

The biblical view is that we are created in God's image as persons-in-community, as God is a community of dynamic love between Father, Son, and Spirit from before creation. When we are called to "love our neighbour as ourselves," it means, You shall love your neighbour *as being your own self*. Your neighbour is your true self. You have no self in yourself.¹³ And Jesus pushed the bounds of who is the neighbour to the limit to include the enemy. Further, the teaching from Matthew 25 (31ff) is that Christ is invariably to be found "in the least of these"—in any and every neighbour without exception, in any and all enemies without exception. Love in the New Testament is the ceaseless attempt to make the enemy a friend, to try without limit to draw a circle of inclusion around the other.

Therefore a "Christian soldier", a "Christian executioner", or any kind of "Christian-cum-destroyer-of-neighbour/enemy" is a contradiction in terms, or, baldly stated: a heresy.

So much of the Christian evangelistic enterprise is precisely that: a false call and choice or decision ("heresy" in the original Greek connotation) to "come to Jesus" independent of the call to "come to ourselves" (what the prodigal son did) precisely in the neighbour, the enemy. As two similar poles of a magnet repel each other, so does the call and decision to come to Jesus contradict any independence from the call to love the neighbour, love the enemy. For there are two great commands, not one: to love God *and* neighbour/enemy. When the evangelistic call stops at loving Jesus, it is a heresy, as surely as judgment without similar offer of grace and forgiveness is a Christian travesty. It is biblically impossible to come to Jesus without coming to the other, supremely the enemy. Failure to believe *and* destroying the enemy are equally denials of the faith.

René Girard: I See Satan Fall Like Lightning

CBC *IDEAS* broadcaster, [David Cayley](#), did five hours of radio programming on the thought and influence of French literary critic, anthropologist, and social scientist, René Girard. Girard is considered by a growing number of scholars worldwide to be the major theorist on violence and its origins in the 20th century. [Charles Bellinger](#) also opines this most recently in his brilliant study: [The Genealogy of Violence](#).

A reviewer in *Comparative Literature* writes:

René Girard's work suggests the projects of those nineteenth-century intellectual giants—Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud—who still cast such long shadows today.

Philosopher Paul Dumouchel of the University of Québec writes:

Beginning from literary criticism and ending with a general theory of culture, an explanation of the role of religion in primitive societies and a radical reinterpretation of Christianity, René Girard has completely modified the landscape in the social sciences. Ethnology, history of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology and literary criticism are explicitly mobilized in this enterprise. Theology, economics and

¹³ See on this: [Living in Communion: An Interview With Father Thomas Hopko](#).

political sciences, history and sociology—in short, all the social sciences, and those that used to be called the moral sciences—are influenced by it (quoted in Bailie, p. 6).

He added that Girard's anthropology provides the way for an entire recasting of human epistemology.

Entire international conferences have been convened to discuss Girard's contributions to human knowledge. Since 1990, there has been an annual gathering in Europe or North America of international scholars (mainly) across a broad spectrum of disciplines, and some activists around Girard's discoveries. It is called: [*Colloquium on Violence and Religion*](#). I have been privileged to attend and present workshops at two of those gatherings.

Girard delineates three great intellectual discoveries that have informed his development throughout a long and distinguished academic career. They are: *mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the absolute uniqueness, anthropologically, of the Bible*. Leaving aside the first two, Girard writes of his third and most formative discovery thus:

I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent . . .

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, ed., p.141).

In his [*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*](#), he adds:

The Passion accounts [the stories of Jesus' crucifixion] reveal a phenomenon that unbeknownst to us generates all human cultures and still warps our human vision in favor of all sorts of exclusions and scapegoating. If this analysis is true, the explanatory power of Jesus' death is much greater than we realize, and Paul's exalted idea of the Cross as the source of all knowledge is anthropologically sound.

The opposition between the scapegoat concealed in mythology and unconcealed in Judaism and Christianity illuminates not only archaic religions, not only many neglected features of the Gospels, but above all the relationship between the two, the unique truth of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since all this knowledge comes from the Gospels, the present book can define itself as a defense of [the] Judaic and Christian tradition, as an *apology* of Christianity rooted in what amounts to a Gospel-inspired breakthrough in the field of social science, not of theology (2001, p.3).

Conclusion: Is Violence Master of Us All?

In the third chapter of [Embodiment Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis](#), “Forgiveness Eclipsed,” [L. Gregory Jones](#) asks whether violence is the master of us all. He tells the true story of a Catholic priest, [Maximilian Kolbe](#), who on July 30, 1941, in Auschwitz concentration Camp, stepped forward to offer himself for punishment of starvation by death in place of one of ten who were so sentenced. As the days ground on, and all the men slowly starved, the priest consistently responded to fellow captives and captors alike with love and forgiveness. His actions increasingly inspired his fellow captives and unnerved the captors. His refusal to submit to, and thus reproduce, violence, became recognized as a growing threat to the Nazis. On the 16th day, the Nazis killed the priest, since he was so subversive to the good order of the Camp. In the fictionalized novel by [Ian MacMillan](#) about this true story, entitled *Orbit of Darkness*, one character says:

Those who give up their lives, at least in principle, become more dangerous to the Germans than planes or tanks. *They become the ultimate weapon* ([p. 49], Jones, 1995, pp. 91ff, italics added).

Fr. Kolbe has since been canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church.

This is precisely the Apostle Paul’s thesis in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, as quoted earlier:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

The weapons Christians wield are subversive to the core of every cultural institution known to human history, caught in endless spirals of scapegoating violence. On the one hand there is the *wisdom of the world* that is *foolishness in God’s sight*. On the other, *there is the wisdom of the Gospel* that is arguably *the most potent subversive force in human history*.

As Walter Wink has taught us, the Nazis were defeated indeed, but Nazism called forth a response of violence so identical to the *spirit* of Nazism that we have reaped the whirlwind of violence in the West ever since. We became what we hated in the Nazis. The indiscriminate slaughter of hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians through incendiary bombing raids on civilian targets in hundreds of German and Japanese cities, topped off by the dropping of two atomic bombs spelling instant death for multiplied thousands of non-combatants, is overwhelming witness to that horrible reality.

Christians believe they are called to be *now*, what the world is meant to become *then*. They are called to lives

. . . lived on eschatological edge (Johnson, 1986, p. 265).

Living the end now. And what is that end? It is the glorious vision of the *Peaceable Kingdom* for which all humanity yearns. Listen to the biblical depiction in Isaiah 11:6-9:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Amen!

§ § §

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